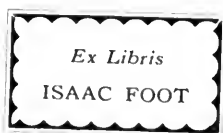


De la fontaine 458





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Jean de la Fontaine

By FRANK HAMEL

AUTHOR OF

"THE DAUPHINES OF FRANCE," "AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MARQUISE,"
"A WOMAN OF THE REVOLUTION," "A LADY OF THE GARTER," ETC.

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PREFACE

LA FONTAINE, whose place is amongst the foremost of French men of letters, needs no introduction to the world. His Fables are known universally, his "Contes" by all students of French literature. His works were printed and reprinted in a series of magnificent editions. They were translated into many languages, and were illustrated by great artists: the Fables by Oudry and Gustave Doré, the "Contes" by Eisen ("Edition des Fermiers-Généraux"), by Fragonard, and others.

In a manner the poet may be said to stand midway between the old and the new, for he appreciated the humour of the Renaissance period and adapted it to the clear and sparkling style of the Grand Siècle.

His life is made up of small incidents, many friendships, and a true passion for poetry. He was closely in touch with Boileau, Racine, and Molière, thus forming one of the most remarkable quartette of a brilliant period of French literary history.

He had a number of women friends, but never a great passion. Among those he held dearest were the gay niece of Mazarin, Mme la Duchesse de Bouillon,

the actress La Champmeslé, and the "illustrious lady who was an honour to her sex and to her century," Mme de la Sablière, the author of "Christian Maxims."

The biographer Walckenaer declared that the best of feminine influences was lacking in La Fontaine's life. "If Heaven," he wrote, apostrophising the poet, "had bestowed upon you a companion who had made you familiar with the tranquil pleasures of domestic life, your imagination would have been no less gay, no less keen, no less *spirituelle*, but better regulated and more pure."

The fabulist's chief charm lies in his loveliness and his helplessness.

The translation into English of the Fables is taken, unless otherwise stated, from the version by Elizur Wright, in Bohn's Standard Library, 1846, by very kind permission of Messrs. George Bell & Sons, the publishers.

I also wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Messrs. G. P. Putnam's Sons for a translation by Katharine P. Wormeley from "Portraits of the Seventeenth Century, Historic and Literary," by Sainte-Beuve, and to Messrs. Wm. Blackwood & Sons for several translations by W. L. Collins from "La Fontaine and other French Fabulists."

FRANK HAMEL.

LONDON, *Autumn*, 1911.

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JEAN DE LA FONTAINE

CHAPTER I

YOUTH

THERE is an old story, repeated by Walpole, of a little girl who was told to say the Lord's Prayer in French, and who, being far better acquainted with La Fontaine's fables than with the paternoster, began : "Notre père sur un arbre perché." Probably this unconscious tribute to the poet's influence is one of the most flattering that has ever been paid, for there is no sincerity like the ingenuous sincerity of childhood. Among the many deliberate compliments and eulogies lavished upon the same author, that of Walpole himself is perhaps one of the best. He wrote in French to President Hénault : "Tous les autres auteurs, qui ont le plus approfondi le cœur humain, ne font que faire parler la nature, mais, c'est la nature qui fait parler La Fontaine."¹

Nature shone thus knowingly through his verses because he had been thoroughly imbued with her spirit

¹ Letter of August 17th, 1766. Paget-Toynbee Edition, vol. vii. pp. 34-5. (1904.)

in his early years. Nevertheless, he did not give expression to her beauties until he had left her scenes far behind him and dwelt in cities amidst society of the most complex and luxurious kind. The presence of La Fontaine at the Court of Louis XIV. makes a pleasant study in contrasts. It was the age of glory, of self-seeking and self-assertion, of rule and regulation, of everything that made for material grandeur.

Into this oddly antipathetic atmosphere was pitchforked a raw, inexperienced country youth—for the passage of years had not made a man of him—whose predominating qualities were simplicity and naturalness, without cunning, foresight, or ambition. He repudiated everything that was conventional, he never did anything he did not wish to do, he never concerned himself about other people's affairs unless they were in trouble and applied to him for help, and he dreamt of a Utopia where there were neither laws, business, nor finance, and where common objects lacked symmetry, regularity, and uniformity.

His was an odd, ungoverned mind. He undertook neither duties nor responsibilities, whether public or private. He was quite incapable of looking after his own interests, but extremely capable of discovering friends who devoted themselves to him and his entertainment. Seemingly he belonged to an earlier century than the one in which he lived, and although he attempted to adapt himself to the conditions of the day, it is not easy to say whether the poet had more

influence on the times or the times more influence on the poet.

During his youth there were no signs of premature genius. The child's mental qualities developed very slowly, and for years his gifts lay dormant.

La Fontaine was born at the beginning of July, 1621, at Château-Thierry, in Champagne. It was usual to baptize babies on their birthday, or at latest the day following, therefore the record of his birth gives to within a few hours the time of his appearance in the world.¹

The infant's father, Charles de la Fontaine, was Commissioner of Waters and Forests and King's Councillor, the former appointment having been held by his father, an older Jean, who had retired from business to fill it. The La Fontaines had been successful merchants in their day, the drapery trade having attracted them in earlier generations. On the maternal side La Fontaine's relatives had a solid reputation for science, learning, and literary culture.

¹ Act of Baptism of Jean de la Fontaine (extracted from the register of the parish of Saint-Crépin, at Château-Thierry):

"The eighth day of this present month (July), being the year 1621, a son named Jean has been baptized by me the undersigned pastor. The father is M. Charles de la Fontaine, King's Councillor and Commissioner of Waters and Forests of the Duchy of Château-Thierry. The mother is Demoiselle Françoise Pidoux. The godfather, the gentleman Jean de la Fontaine, the godmother Claude Josse, wife of M. Louis Guerin (or Gurin), also Director of Waters and Forests of the said locality.

"(Signed) LA VALLÉE

"DE LA FONTAINE."

His mother was a Pidoux, and the Pidoux possessed advantages which were not merely academic. They were noted for longevity of life, long noses, and the fact that they were distantly connected with the house of Richelieu. The last qualification redounded largely to their credit in the provincial circles in which they moved.

Of Françoise Pidoux, who had the glory of bringing into the world so famous a poet (though when his fame came she was not alive to take pleasure in it), very little is known. Her father was a dignitary of importance, the magistrate of Coulommiers. Her brother also held an official post. Before her marriage with Charles de la Fontaine she lived within twenty miles of her future husband's home. When she met him she was a widow with one daughter, Anne de Jouy, who appears to have played but a small part in her half-brother's life, and who married a M. Henri de Villemontée.

The La Fontaine household was not a large one ; besides the poet, only one other son was born to Françoise Pidoux of her second marriage ; this was Claude, who became a priest.

At that time the line was very clearly drawn in France between *noblesse* and *bourgeoisie*, so clearly indeed that sometimes misunderstandings occurred because it was a temptation for those who were just below the line to hoist themselves above it. Any lever they could find was used for this purpose, preferably an

ancestor by marriage with a handle to his or her name, or the acquisition of land which had seigniorial rights. In the case of the La Fontaines there was some such ambition to regard themselves as ennobled and to use the title of Esquire. The title appeared in the marriage certificate of the poet's father, dated January 13, 1617, as well as in some later documents. But laxity in these questions of rank was not permitted by law, and in 1661 Colbert issued an ordinance against those who falsely claimed titles in the hope of escaping certain taxes with which the people were burdened, and La Fontaine incurred a penalty of two thousand livres for using the "esquire" without having paid for the privilege. In this misfortune the poet addressed himself to the Duc de Bouillon, who was *seigneur* of Château-Thierry, begging him to intercede with Colbert on his behalf. He thought the word "esquire" conveyed but an empty honour, and assured every one concerned that he had never wished to represent himself as of gentle birth, that *grâce à l'écurie* he was a ruined man, and that he had inadvertently signed the contracts containing the forbidden qualification without having read their contents, just as he might have appended his name blindly to his own death-warrant :

"Et lisez-vous tout ce qu'on vous apporte ?
J'aurois signé ma mort de même sorte,"¹

he concluded pathetically.

¹ Epître à Monsieur le duc de Bouillon.

Bereft of the modest courtesy title to which they had laid claim, and labelled *petit bourgeois*, the family of La Fontaine had nevertheless pretences to a recognised position on account of the honourable and ancient appointment of Commissioner of Waters and Forests,¹ held by several of its members.

As a boy La Fontaine understood very few of the difficulties which attended his father's work ; when as a man he inherited the post of commissioner he saw in it nothing but disagreeables. Utterly incompetent in business affairs, he never succeeded in mastering the ABC of forestry, but his early life in the woods was in itself an education. He learned the less arduous branches of woodcraft as he trotted placidly at his father's heels on the daily rounds through glades and

¹ In the fourteenth century a system of forestry had been elaborated by Philippe le Bel which consisted of a complex organisation establishing complete guardianship over one of the most important sections of public domain. The chief of the staff was the Commissioner, called *maître des eaux et forêts*. This official was the successor of the *enquêteur général*, who had superseded the *grand forestier* of the early ages. His duties, broadly speaking, were to administer the affairs of the district, receive the reports of the verderers, gruaris, and foresters, deal with the cutting down of trees and sale of timber, appoint the *gardes-marteau* who marked the trees to be felled, inspect the plantations, clearings, drainage, roads, embankments, and bridges, keep the rivers navigable, and supervise the hunting and fishing on their territories. The work was greatly complicated by the number of rules and regulations framed, which increased, if anything, throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Several important laws came into force in the seventeenth century. Two dealing with the chase were dated respectively June 1601 and September 1607. In August 1669 Colbert practically reorganised the whole of the administration dealing with waters and forests, an upheaval which had no little influence in La Fontaine's affairs.

thickets, visiting the outlying huts where the foresters lived, interviewing the warders and gamekeepers on their beat, watching the wood-choppers at their work, and, while his father was busily engaged with the men, slipping away by himself to climb trees for birds' nests, or to gather spoils from the flower-laden bushes, catch fish in preserved waters or mischievously set hounds upon a hare. Even at the most destructive age of boyhood his love of animals was profound, and he was never cruel. For hours he would lie watching the smallest specimens of the insect world carrying on their domestic economy, or would wait contentedly for a squirrel to come down to earth or for a mole to peep above it.

Presently he developed a love of solitary wandering, which bred dreams, and not always happy dreams, among the cradles of verdure which adorned the hills round Château-Thierry. Even when town-life had attracted him so strongly that he found it impossible to break away from it, there was in the depths of his poetic temperament a wild yearning for mother-nature to whom he might tell his woes. In "Adonis," in "Les Filles de Minée," in "Daphnis et Alcimadure," he expresses the need of renouncing cities in order to pour forth secret troubles to the forests and the winds. The hero of the first poem confides his story to the trees and does not win their understanding; in the second Céphale leaves civilisation behind him, plunges into the forest and cries aloud

his inmost thoughts. "Alas!" declared the poet in "Daphnis et Alcimadure," "it was to the winds that he betrayed his grief." Again and again he insisted that the winds were not good listeners, that the trees nodded and shook their wise old heads, but had no comfort to bestow upon the distressed sufferer who made them witness of his bewailings.

There are brighter passages in his works in which nature smiles, the joyous sun pours through the glades, and the birds raise their tuneful songs to heaven; but the wistful note is characteristic, for La Fontaine was not always happy during the time of his early wanderings in the neighbourhood of his home.

The small, picturesque town where the poet spent his youth lay on the confines of the ancient provinces of Brie and of Champagne, about fifty miles from Paris in the *généralité* of Soissons. In the elliptical fashion of the day Château-Thierry became Chaûry. A semi-circle of undulating hills surrounded the buildings. The neighbourhood was beloved, and has been immortalised by the artist Corot.¹

¹ A contemporary description of the place and its inhabitants was written by one Claude Galien in his work "La Découverte des Eaux Minérales de Chasteauthierry," published in 1630.

"On the banks of this fish-full river of the Marne, forming one of the breasts of the town," he wrote, "several mountains rise adorned with all such beauties as nature lavishes upon the earth, namely, abundance of fruits, delicacy of wines, and fertility of soil. On the summit of one of these hills Thierry in former times caused a magnificent castle to be built (ornamented by architraves, plinths, balustrades, astragals, round towers, and other embellishments), which would now be nothing more than deplorable ruins were it not for the liberality

The castle which gave its name to the town was said to have been built originally in the eighth century by Charles Martel to serve as a prison for the feeble Thierry (Theodoric) IV. When La Fontaine was born it had been rebuilt, and belonged to François d'Orléans, Comte de Saint-Paul, who married Anne de Caumont, a charming and pious lady. After the Count's death on October 7, 1631, the property reverted to the Crown, and Louis XIII. paid a visit to Château-Thierry for the ostensible purpose of taking possession of his dukedom. This royal visit must have been one of the most memorable events of La Fontaine's early years. He was ten when the State carriages bearing Louis XIII. and the great Cardinal Richelieu rolled close by his home on their way to the castle.

The King combined business with pleasure at Château-Thierry. He was able to supervise the operations of his army under La Force, then about to march into Lorraine, whilst he enjoyed hunting and the lovely forest scenery. He contemplated turning the Château into a pleasure resort like Saint-Germain or Fontainebleau, and with this end in view paid further visits in 1633 and 1635. In the latter year Anne of Austria

of our own prince, who, giving them a renewed lease of life, established their claim to be considered among the finest buildings of the century. On the same slope of the eminence lay a small town with a sufficient population, over which Bellona, Themis, Astraea, and the Charites (the Graces) preside with much dignity.

"The buildings are fine and well constructed, the situation is agreeable, and the view very pleasant. The inhabitants are curious in their dress, courteous in their manners, and polished in their speech."

accompanied him. News had arrived at that time of a victory over the Spanish ; and because Louis desired to keep his exultant joy from the Queen, lest it should hurt her feelings, he made a little bonfire in his private apartments. Throwing a number of documents and envelopes into the flames, he cried out, " Voilà le feu de joie de la défaite des Espagnols contre le gré de la Reine." The Queen, being informed of what had taken place, gave way to boundless indignation, and a serious quarrel occurred between husband and wife. The Cardinal, who was then at his neighbouring estate, Condé en Brie, was sent for in great haste, and through his intervention a reconciliation was at length arrived at.

La Fontaine was now fourteen and had begun his education. D'Olivet, his biographer, said he studied under country masters who taught him nothing but Latin. Fréron believed that he learnt his first lessons at Rheims, a town which he loved. It may, however, be regarded as certain that he was sent to the college of Château-Thierry, an institute which almost rivalled in popularity the more celebrated universities of Rheims and of Paris.

This school was founded in the thirteenth century by Blanche d'Artois, daughter of Robert d'Artois and wife of Henri de Navarre. Left a widow at an early age, she married Edmund, Count of Lancaster, and lived at the Castle of Château-Thierry, the estate being a legacy from her first husband. Intent on

good and charitable works, she acquired a house in the Rue du Château and established classes for boys. Not far from Château-Thierry was the monastery of Val-Secret, and she appointed one of the monks to be her private chaplain. Among his duties was that of teaching the children. The name of their first teacher was Jean Leclerc. Writing, grammar, Latin, and of course theology were taught. The school was free to all, and succeeded so amazingly that before long several masters were required.

The time spent on education did not wholly preclude games and amusements. One favourite game was called *Engueule* or *Naude*, and consisted in throwing sticks at a crown which hung on a cord between two poles. The one who brought down the crown was named King of the Naude. This game was played on the last Monday before Lent. Shrove Tuesday was celebrated by cock-fights. Holding the victorious cock in his arms, the victor was borne home in triumph after the event.

On the Thursday following a new form of entertainment was organised. Early in the morning every pupil rode to the college gates on horseback, a sword buckled at his side, his cap adorned with a cockade and a branch of gilded holly.¹ Preceded by drummers and musicians, the King of the Naude, wearing his crown and carrying a sceptre, headed the procession. With bared swords they all set out towards Val-

¹ Holly was the Bouillon coat-of-arms ; their motto *Nul ne s'y frotte*.

Secret, where every one dismounted at the door of the church and chanted an *antienne* to the Virgin. Then an adjournment was made to the council hall, where the monks were congregated. After a polite speech had been addressed by one of the scholars to the Abbé or his representative, the pupils marched three times round the large centre table, drank to the health of the monks, and then proceeded to seat themselves at a special banqueting-table reserved for them.

After the feast the scholars went into the large hall carrying their swords, and there arranged round the table were as many loaves of bread as there were pupils. Again the procession marched three times round the table to the sound of music and drums, and then each youth spiked a loaf with his sword or an iron-pointed stick. After three more turns about the table, they mounted their horses and rode back to the town. When they reached the courtyard of the castle they marched three times round a fountain in the centre, and the King of the Naude fastened a hen to the door of the courtyard leading to the church. He struck the first blow at the poor fowl with his sword, and it was speedily dispatched, amidst the chanting of a joyous song.

All these quaint ceremonies were in vogue at the date when La Fontaine was a pupil at the college ; and although the game of Naude was dropped about the middle of the seventeenth century, the cock-fights and

slaying of the hen were carried on until the outbreak of the Revolution.

It is difficult to say whether La Fontaine played more heartily than he studied. School and school-tasks were alike irksome to him. He seemed to find a melancholy happiness in idling away his time, and probably liked to moon about alone in recreation hours better than to join in the games. Intelligence was not lacking, but his tastes were peculiar, and no amount of discipline succeeded in moulding him to be like other boys. Yet he did not lack companions. His brother Claude, although two years younger than Jean, was probably as far advanced in his studies. The two brothers Maucroix were their chief friends. Maucroix *père*, who was an attorney at Noyon, was intimate with the La Fontaines and their relatives, the Pintrels and Jannarts, and this led to the frequent interchange of visits between the families. M. Maucroix sometimes stayed at Château-Thierry with Robert de Joyeuse, Lieutenant du Roi of Champagne, and he also had connections of his own in the town. Perhaps this accounted for his decision to send his two boys, François and Louis, to the College. François was two years and a half older than La Fontaine, and Louis was older still.

The intimacy which sprang up between Jean and François lasted till death. It is considered probable that the boys studied in company at Rheims as well as at Château-Thierry as suggested by Fréron

in his biography ; but no proof of this exists. That the Maucroix and La Fontaines were schoolmates seems to be vouched for by a copy of Lucian (August. Picton. 1621) belonging to Pintrel, which contains the names of both Louis Maucroix and La Fontaine, the latter carelessly traced in capital letters printed in a boyish hand. An inscription on the fly-leaf, "de la Fontaine, bon garçon, fort sage et fort modeste," is a characteristic description of the *bonhomme* of later years. It does not touch upon his qualifications as a student. There is evidence enough in La Fontaine's writings that he did not love knowledge for its own sake, and that he disliked schoolmasters and their scholastic ways.

He wrote in his epigram, "Contre un pédant de Collège" :

"Il est trois points dans l'homme de collège,
Présomption, injures, mauvais sens."

And to these three points he added a fourth :

"Qu'il aille voir la cour tant qu'il voudra
Jamais la cour ne le dégradera."

The same contempt of professorial mannerisms and airs is expressed in "The Schoolboy, the Pedant, and the Owner of a Garden" ("Fables," bk. ix. 5) :

"I hate all eloquence and reason
Expended plainly out of season.
Of all the beasts that earth have cursed
While they have fed on't,
The schoolboy strikes me as the worst—
Except the pedant."

He scoffed openly at "all critics, pedants, men of endless prose," in "The Boy and the Schoolmaster" ("Fables," bk. i. 19), which tells the story of the little boy who fell into the Seine, and cried to his teacher to save him, but had to wait until the latter had delivered a lecture on his carelessness.

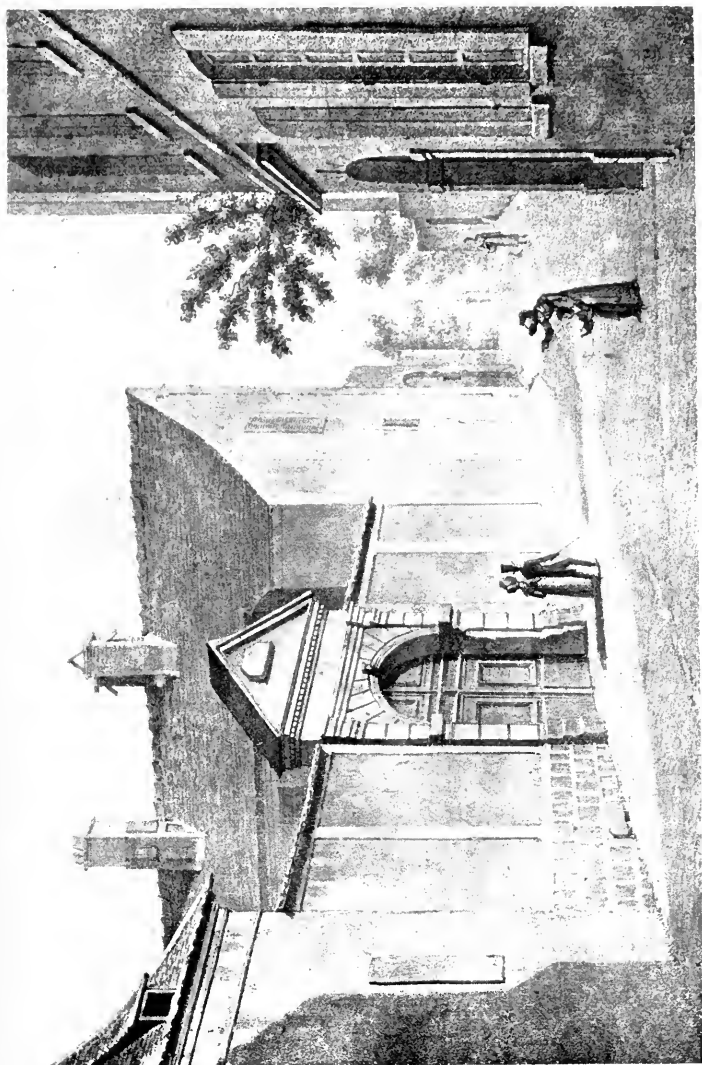
"No matter what the task,
Their precious tongues must teach ;
Their help in need you ask,
You first must hear them preach."

"With the exception of misers," wrote Chamfort, his commentator, "La Fontaine railed most keenly against pedants." His own teacher, Malezard, who succeeded Balhan as principal of the College, fared little better at his hands, and it has been suggested that one of the Fables was aimed against this worthy gentleman. Some of the teachers who presided over Château-Thierry College did not deserve the scorn attached by La Fontaine to those who excelled in book-learning. One at least of them, so ran the legend, when asked to choose any passage from the classics he liked and to explain it, remained absolutely silent, being unable to utter a word. La Fontaine would have regarded this ignorance as a fault on the right side.

François Maucroix was more brilliant than La Fontaine at school, although he was no more pains-taking. Maucroix was vivacious, witty, and possessed of a good memory, whilst La Fontaine appeared dull and moody until he was roused. When the time came

for the friends to separate temporarily, Maucroix went to the Collège d'Harcourt in Paris, and the future fabulist, having been influenced by some friend, entered the Oratory in the Rue Saint-Honoré. "On the 27th (April 1641) M. Jean de la Fontaine, aged twenty, has been received so that he may pursue the pious studies of our brethren," ran the entry in the register. Adry, the librarian of the Oratory, amplified this bare statement of fact. "This passing taste for the ecclesiastical profession may have been inspired in him by G. Héricart, Canon of Soissons, who at this time presented him with some pious books." Here there appears to be a discrepancy of dates. M. G. Héricart was a nephew of the Marie Héricart who became La Fontaine's wife. He was born in 1664; and if he gave theological works to his uncle by marriage, it was some time after such presents could have had the supposed effect. Adry probably confused the donor of the pious works with some other priest. At the age of twenty the budding poet was impressionable to any idea which entered his head.

In October 1641 Claude followed Jean to the Oratory, and having more taste for the monastic life he remained until 1650. When Claude came Jean left in order to go to the Seminary of Saint-Magloire, where he remained a year before definitely deciding that the Church could not offer him a suitable career. "At the age of nineteen," wrote d'Olivet, "he went to the Oratory, and eighteen months later left it



LA FONTAINE'S HOUSE IN CHÂTEAU-THIERRY

From a lithograph by E. Pingret



again. When one realised the kind of man he was, it was easier to see why he left it than to imagine why he had ever thought of entering a house where it was necessary to submit to so many rules." The feelings with which he regarded this episode of his life are not on record, unless a remark he made to Boileau may be taken as indicating them: "I would far rather be occupied in reading the poets than 'The Practice of Perfect Christianity,' by Rodriguez," he said.

According to one account he went from Saint-Magloire to Juilly, but all that is heard of him there was that having tied a thread to his cap he dangled it out of the window of his cell and tried to catch the birds and butterflies. Nothing could be more characteristic than this glimpse of him.

In the meantime Maucroix went steadily on with his legal studies and succeeded in winning a few cases. He said himself that he only pleaded at the Bar five or six times. Charles de la Fontaine, anxious that his son should take up one of the solid professions, and acquiescing in his decision not to enter the Church, suggested that he too should study for the Bar; and in fact he read so well as to be distinguished in a legal document of 1649 by the title of "advocat en la cour du parlement."

Neither of the young men persevered with their work. La Fontaine very soon returned to his native city, and Maucroix, feeling perhaps that self-

assurance was lacking, grew lazy, fell into the hands of gay companions, frequented the *ruelles*, entered the salons at the heels of Conrart, Voiture, Chapelain, and Sarrasin, and cultivated the ways of a *précieux*. He was young and made himself liked, but he was not clever enough to leave his mark, coming into competition as he did with the older and more brilliant men of the literary world. He was ordered by his father to leave Paris and offer his services to his old friend Robert de Joyeuse. Mme de Joyeuse, who fully approved of the smattering of culture which Maucroix had brought with him from the capital, appointed him her secretary, and he followed in her train from château to château and back to Paris.

During a stay in Château-Thierry at this time, Maucroix once more enjoyed the society of La Fontaine, who had been trying to adapt himself once more to home life and forestry. Although their friendship had been without a break, it is possible they had not met since their days at college. The friends had many traits in common; the same taste for pleasure, the same inclination towards poetry, the same disdain for wealth, and the same warm affections. Two new interests were entering into the lives of these young men—love and poetry.

There is a very well-known story told by d'Olivet about the fabulist's first awakening to the beauties of verse, an awakening that did not occur until he had reached the age of twenty-two. One day an officer

who was staying at Château-Thierry in winter quarters happened to read to him, with much dramatic emphasis, the Ode by Malherbe "On the attempt committed upon the person of Henri le Grand, December 19, 1605."

He listened, rapt in transports of joy, admiration, and astonishment. "The experience of a man, born with a great disposition for music, who, after having lived in wild woods, suddenly hears the sound of a harpsichord beautifully played, was the impression made by harmonious poetry upon M. de la Fontaine," wrote d'Olivet. Once roused, La Fontaine became a different person. No longer dreaming or dazed, he was alert, happy, and full of enthusiasm. His eyes sparkled, he spoke rapidly, he made quick gestures, and exhibited all the characteristics of the artistic temperament at its best. He began to read Malherbe at once, and was so drawn to his writings that after having spent many nights in learning them by heart he hurried by day into the woods, there to declaim all he had learnt. At the hour he lived in a beautiful world of imagination, and became inspired with an overmastering desire to versify. His first attempts were not altogether successful. Seeing that he ran the risk of becoming a mere imitator, his friend and relative, Pintrel, advised him to study various works by great masters before attempting to produce poetry of his own. He drew his attention especially to the classics, Horace, Virgil, and Terence, as well as to the best French writers, and La Fontaine set himself to profit by this counsel.

Maucroix, on the other hand, experienced no such sudden putting forth of poetical blossoms. Since the days of his youth he had written sparklets of verse, and his poems date from 1638, five years before La Fontaine bethought himself of emulation.

But in affairs of the heart, if we are to believe all that is told, the younger man was also the more precocious. Tallemant des Réaux mentioned more than one intrigue in which La Fontaine cut anything but a noble figure. He suggested that some of the flirtations were hardly innocent, or that, if they were, it was not La Fontaine's fault. He was seen one wintry night hurrying through country lanes carrying a dark lantern and wearing white boots, an article of clothing which at that period denoted the gallant fop.¹

The preoccupied schoolboy, the idle dreamer, was waking up to some purpose. Suspicion naturally attached to a young country bumpkin who sported showy footwear and gay raiment far better suited to the extravagant courtier, and who tripped lightly through the woods to a rendezvous when he ought to have been at home in bed. No wonder that gossip

¹ Chevalier Grammont wore similar boots below a cassock, which was not long enough to conceal them and his gilt spurs, when he was introduced at the Court of Louis XIII. in a parti-coloured attire, half ecclesiastical, half military. M. d'Hauterive, hearing that his brother, the Keeper of the Seals, was condemned to punishment by the same king, set off to ride through the night, in the hope of saving him, without stopping to change the white boots in which he had been spending the evening in the company of the fair.

clung to his name, and that his amour with the wife of the Lieutenant du Roi of Château-Thierry became notorious. The lady possessed a little dog, and La Fontaine abducted the animal, with the intention of facilitating a stolen visit to her room. But his plans were frustrated by the unforeseen arrival of a second lady, and Tallemant des Réaux told of his reassuring apology to his enchantress, who might have been frightened by his presence in her room—"Fear nothing. It is only La Fontaine." Was it strange that his seductive manner found this fair dame but half cruel and many others only too kind? Throughout his life the poet was influenced as only a man of his temperament could be influenced by women. He found their charms irresistible, their friendship sweet, their care of him invaluable. His relations with them bring out clearly the fact of his dependent, gentle, and clinging nature.

Whilst La Fontaine dallied with light amours, Maucroix indulged in a grand passion. He was indiscreet enough to fall in love with Henriette de Joyeuse, daughter of his patroness. This young lady, wrote Tallemant, "had wit, sang prettily, had the most charming figure possible, and eyes which were exceedingly fine. But with all these advantages she was not a great beauty, though, taking everything into consideration, it was hardly possible to discover a more delightful person. She was only four [fourteen] when Maucroix, then a youth, following, or desiring to

follow, the career of barrister, began to feel sentiment for her. . . . As he was good-looking, was gentle and intelligent, made as good verses and wrote as good letters as any one, at fifteen she had much affection for him."

The difference in rank and fortune made an alliance between the two impossible, and Henriette was sought in marriage by the Marquis de Lénoncourt, who died on the battlefield. When she became the wife of the Marquis des Brosses, Maucroix felt that he had nothing left to live for. They met again some time after her marriage, which proved unhappy, and found that their mutual passion had abated not a whit. Seeing that Henriette was only too willing to throw herself into an intrigue which would have been very inexpedient, Maucroix decided to say farewell to the woman who had deeply fascinated him.

The follies and variabilities of youth were to receive a check in the case of both the poets. Maucroix accepted a canonry at Rheims in April 1847, and La Fontaine was urged by his father into bonds of matrimony, which were designed to steady and establish him. Realising that a serious step was in front of both himself and his friend, at the parting hour La Fontaine wrote his fable, "Le Meunier, son Fils et l'Ane," which he dedicated to Maucroix, and in which he pointed out the difficulties of making the choice of a career and at the same time of satisfying public opinion that the chosen course was a wise one.

"A quoi me résoudre-je ? Il est temps que j'y pense.
 Vous connoissez mon bien, mon talent, ma naissance :
 Dois-je dans la province établir mon séjour,
 Prendre emploi dans l'armée, ou bien charge à la cour ?
 Tout au monde est mêlé d'amertume et de charmes :
 La guerre a ses douceurs, l'hymen a ses alarmes.
 Si je suivois mon goût, je saurois où buter,
 Mais j'ai les miens, la cour, le peuple à contenter."¹

"FABLES," bk. iii. 1 (first published in 1668).

La Fontaine urged on his friend, but desired to escape his own fate. Taking a wife seemed to him a more momentous deed than accepting a canonry. "Hymen hath its alarms," he wrote, and it was the very eve of his marriage. The phrase expressed his forebodings for the future. The same thought was repeated again and again in his writings. "Le seul nom de l'hymen me fait frémir de crainte"² he wrote, pursuing a favourite theme ; and again, "J'ai vu beaucoup d'hymens, aucuns d'eux ne me tentent."³ In later years a longing note appeared in his writings, as though he realised that he had missed the best. His fears were fulfilled. He was to experience discomfort and dissatisfaction, caused by clash of temperament in his own ill-chosen mating.

¹ "What shall I do ? 'Tis time I chose profession.

You know my fortune, birth, and disposition :

Ought I to make the country my resort,

Or seek the army, or to rise at court ?

There's naught but mixeth bitterness with charms :

War hath its pleasures, hymen its alarms.

'Twere nothing hard to take my natural bent,

But I've a world of people to content.'

² "L'Eunuque."

³ "Le mal marié."

CHAPTER II

MARRIAGE

ON November 10th, 1647, La Fontaine was married to Marie Héricart. It is unlikely that love or even mutual inclination entered into the bargain. There was some fluttering in the respective households before the alliance became an established fact. D'Olivet wrote of the poet : "Although he had little taste for marriage, he agreed to it to please his relatives." Tallemant said : "His father induced him to marry, and he did it to oblige him." It was customary for parents to arrange suitable marriages for their children, and this case was no exception to the rule. Probably La Fontaine, who always moved along the line of least resistance, never questioned their choice for a moment, much as he may have regretted their decision that he must marry at all.

He had now reached the mature age of twenty-six, and had as little stability of character as before. He was glad to be free of the Church, glad to play the Don Juan of the locality, and glad to turn his attention to verse-making. When everything went well with him he was exuberant, when difficulties loomed he withdrew

into his shell. He had no wish to settle down ; he realised that marriage was a lottery in which he was likely to draw a blank. There was no eligible woman among his acquaintances for whom he had any affection. He had already frittered away a good deal of that commodity. He was not fond of deciding for himself, and felt convinced that some one else would be more felicitous in choosing for him. He was something of a fatalist, and not easy to handle.

La Fontaine *père*, concerned on account of his son's light-mindedness, had promised as a bait to give him the succession of one of his well-paid appointments. There was no better way to steady Jean, he thought, than by providing him with a definite occupation, whilst the cares of a household must naturally accustom him to responsibility. La Fontaine, although he had no taste for business, did not object to draw an income. He had felt the need of resources of his own. If marriage would supply the need, then marriage it should be. As for the woman he was to marry, she seemed to him a bright and attractive girl who was young enough to be moulded. She had won a great deal of admiration in the surrounding villages, and no doubt La Fontaine appreciated her youth and freshness, and did not realise that her will was stronger than his own and that she would never become amenable to his influence.

From Marie's point of view there was not much to be said in favour of the proposed match. At the age

of fifteen she had already had more than one admirer. A boy-and-girl affair between a dashing young soldier cousin and herself had left her affections entangled. Most girls of her position and temperament had allowed their thoughts to dwell upon a romance of which the hero was quite ineligible as a husband. She had expensive tastes, like her chosen bridegroom, who, it would appear, was little likely to have money enough to indulge them. Again, Marie was inclined to look down upon most of her provincial neighbours, because she had been in Paris and regarded culture as an indispensable adjunct to existence. Had she been a little older, a little more diplomatic, and a little less hedged in by the conventional methods of the day—in short, had she been rather more modern—she would have turned up her somewhat pointed nose at the proposed match; she would have begged her parents to fix their gaze upon a man who was better able to provide more attractive prospects and a less sober future.

The Héricarts of Ferté Milon were as well connected as the La Fontaines. The male Héricarts, Guillaume and Louis, Louis and Guillaume, grandfather and father, son and grandson, made an imposing array of lieutenants, civil and criminal, perpetual mayors, and such-like dignitaries.¹ The Héricarts were related to the Jannarts, and one Jannart had married a La Fontaine. Another Jannart was King's

¹ The French official posts were as numerous and varied as they are to-day, and cannot be rendered accurately into English.

Councillor and deputy to the *procureur général*. This Jannart, Jacques by name, was Marie's uncle, and with him had originated the idea of the marriage. His relations with the mighty Fouquet greatly influenced the poet's life.

Marie had still another distant cousin, who in some years' time was to shed an added lustre on the family records, and whose boyish surroundings were interwoven to some extent with her own. This was the poet Racine, whose mother, *née* Jeanne Sconin, was descended, as were the Héricarts, from one Pierre Drouart de Norroy, who lived in the fifteenth century.

To follow an intricate pedigree no farther, it must suffice to say that Marie was the daughter of Louis Héricart and his wife Agnès Petit, and that she was born at La Ferté Milon, and baptized in the parish of Saint-Vaast on April 26th, 1633.

To judge from her portrait, painted in later years, and attributed to Mignard, Marie was not at all bad-looking. She wore her hair in charming ringlets clustering round her well-shaped head. Her eyes were large and alert. Her lips were full and rosy, perhaps a trifle sensuous. The less said about her nose the better, for it was like her husband's, aquiline and rather too long. She wore a slightly supercilious air, and it is obvious that she was hard to please. Fréron said she was beautiful, and d'Olivet wrote that she was wanting neither in wit nor beauty. She doubtless had both pride and dignity. From her

early girlhood she seemed ready to appraise highly her own value. Perhaps she was justified in this, for she was certainly better educated than girls in her position and of her class usually expected to be. She had had advantages. What they were is not definitely known, but it is probable that her studies benefited by the presence in La Ferté Milon of certain learned men, the little group of the Solitaries of Port Royal, who took refuge there in July 1638 at the first dispersion. Two of the most distinguished men of the teaching staff, Le Maître and Claude Lancelot, lodged with the family of Vitart, the head of which was great-uncle of Racine by marriage, and therefore connected with the Héricarts. The poet who was later to be a pupil of this school of Jansenists was not born until the year after the invasion of the refugists, but Marie was nearly six and precociously quick.

Before long she was sent to Paris to stay with her aunt, Mme Jannart, and by the time she returned to her native place she was well furnished with knowledge of various kinds, and was quite *au fait* with the ways of the world. The poor wits of La Ferté Milon regarded her as a marvel, and wondered at her stylishness. She was admired by all, adulated, petted by her relatives, and in a fair way to be spoilt for the hum-drum life of a sleepy country town. She had had her chance. Mme Jannart had introduced her to Mme Fouquet and other celebrities in society. She had seen some of the mightiest among the

mighty, and had learnt to speak the language that the literary women spoke in the salons. This was the day when the *précieuses* were at their height, and a young provincial maiden who had all her wits about her could easily pick up the jargon of the *ruelles* when the opportunity came. No wonder that on her return the number of her suitors increased day by day. But she took little notice of them. She was only attracted by the dashing young cousin, Poignant, and he was impossible as a husband.

So Jannart was encouraged to carry on the negotiations, and the La Fontaine-Héricart marriage was celebrated in due course. Where the wedding took place is not known, but the marriage contract was signed at La Ferté Milon. It provided that the bride should receive 20,000 livres from her grandfather and 10,000 from her mother. La Fontaine inherited a legacy from his mother on her death, which had occurred previously. Under normal conditions the establishment of the newly married couple would have been adequately provided for, but the conditions were not normal, for neither of the parties to the agreement was capable of steering the ship, Marie because she was too young and inexperienced, La Fontaine because he was too lazy and preoccupied. After a few years he began selling some of his property in order to meet his liabilities.

No portrait of the poet at the time of his marriage is in existence, but to judge from those of later date

he was good-looking in a rather florid style; his manners were not of the most refined, indeed they were still heavy and countrified. He was of average height, and his figure was good, but thick-set; perhaps Marie called him clumsy. He dressed carelessly, but loved fine clothes, and wore them when his purse permitted. Marie too had a taste for finery, and her leading trait was that she was proud. D'Olivet described her character as very much like that of Mme Honesta in the "Nouvelle de Belphégor":

"Belle et bien faite . . .

Mais d'un orgueil extrême."

But contemporaries existed who affirmed that on the contrary she had a most gentle and pliant character, "as much to her husband as towards all those who lived with her," and that the poet had not thought of her at all when writing "Belphégor," any more than he drew typical portraits of people of the day when he exposed absurdities or vices.¹

Perhaps natural reserve and a certain independence of character were responsible for the misconceptions which many people entertained with regard to Marie de la Fontaine. Glimpses into some of the peculiarities of her nature appear in one of the poet's letters from Limoges written fifteen years after their marriage.

"You never cared to read any travels but those of the Knights of the Round Table," he declared, "but ours well deserve that you should read them. Never-

¹ "Les Mémoires de Trévoux," July 1755, p. 1718.

theless you will find in them matters hardly suited to your taste. I shall make it my business to dress them up, if I can, so as to please you, and it will be left for you to praise my good intentions even if they should not be attended with success. It may even come to pass that if you enjoy my narrative you will learn to appreciate more serious reading in future. You neither play nor work, nor do you attend to the household, and, apart from the hours which your kind friends devote to you out of charity, you have no amusement except reading novels. You have almost exhausted the stock. You have read the old ones so often that you know them. There are very few new ones, and of these few not all are good. So often you are left destitute. Consider, I pray you, what a good thing it would be if in my jocular fashion I had accustomed you to read history, dealing either with places or persons. You would possess something which would preserve you from *ennui* all your life ; provided that there should be no intention of committing it to memory, and still less of quoting it. It is not a good quality in a woman to be learned ; and it is a very bad one to wish to appear so.”¹

There is a sting in the remark hardly worthy of the gentle poet. He had suffered in some way, but the manner of it is not quite clear. A little later he referred to the novels again in a letter of September 19th. Writing of the daughter of a relative whom he had

¹ Letter of August 25th, 1663.

already described as charming and gentle in character, he continued: "I should not know how to tell you anything else about her, were it not that she loves novels very much. You, who love them so much also, will be able to judge the consequences."

Undoubtedly Mlle de la Fontaine—at this time Madame was only used for married ladies of quality—was a little difficult. She had pretensions. Perhaps she did not care for housekeeping, and was angry because she could not afford a number of servants like the fine ladies in town ; perhaps she only grew tired of it when she found that housekeeping for La Fontaine was a very thankless task, that he never came in time for meals, that his purse was always empty and that he made no efforts to fill it. The poet, on the other hand, was horrified to find that he was married to one he regarded as a blue-stocking. In this respect he was very human.

Even Mlle de Scudéry's efforts to put the learned woman on a pedestal so that every one might have the opportunity of admiring her had failed to make her beloved, and the ordinary husband wanted a good housekeeper and companion. She must look to him for all her intellectual fare, she must never wish to think for herself, and she was utterly impossible to live with if she went so far as to desire to commit her thoughts to paper. If La Fontaine's wife ever scribbled romances in the privacy of her own apartments, and it seems quite likely that she did, at least they never saw



JEAN DE LA FONTAINE

After the painting by Rigault. Engraved by Edelinck

the light in print. One of her biographers, M. Salesse, goes so far as to hint that various members of the Historical and Archæological Society of Château-Thierry had manuscripts bearing her signature in their possession. Perish the thought that she wished to be an author ! She had not even learnt how to be a woman and a good wife. Nor does proof exist that she was a good mother.

La Fontaine was to all appearances an equally inconsiderate husband and father. His only son, Charles, was born in October 1653, and Maucroix was appointed godfather. In a desultory kind of way the poet's affections must have been awakened, for in the letter to his wife of August 25th, 1663—that is to say, when Charles was nearly ten—he wrote, “ Give my love to our little *marmot*, and tell him that I shall perhaps bring him a pretty little girl to keep him company and be his playfellow.” Moreover, when he was appealing to the Duc de Bouillon about the heavy fine imposed upon him for using the title esquire, he pointed out that his pecuniary responsibilities extended to his wife and child as well as to his brother. And yet as time passed it became clear that to La Fontaine family ties had but little significance and paternity was neither a privilege nor a pleasure :

“ Toi donc, qui que tu sois, ô père de famille,
Et je ne t'ai jamais envié cet honneur.”¹

“ Fables,” bk. xi. 3.

¹ “ O thou who head'st a family,
An honour never grudged by me.”

He apparently took no interest in his son's education nor in his future career. Marais said that Maucroix taught the boy. Fréron gave quite a different account, declaring that the poet looked after him until he was fourteen, and then put him in the hands of a certain M. de Harlay, who became *procureur général*. Fréron was responsible for the anecdote that La Fontaine and his son met in later years accidentally at a house where both visited, that La Fontaine did not recognise the young man, but finding that he conversed well and wittily he inquired his name. When the truth was made clear to him he remarked: "Indeed! I am very pleased to hear it." Another variation of the same legend was told by Titon du Tillet. La Fontaine when visiting Dr. du Pin met his son on the staircase but failed to recognise him. When presented in the reception room La Fontaine inquired of his host who the young man could be. "What, you do not know your own son?" cried du Pin. La Fontaine, after reflecting a little, answered with an embarrassed air, "I seem to remember having seen him somewhere."

Probably the truth is that when the poet shut the door of his heart against his wife he shut it also against his boy, and that the reasons and date of this unfortunate rupture, whether it was of slow growth or the result of a single disagreement, have never been fully drawn forth from the mists of obscurity.

A great deal of the blame for the unhappy marriage

has been placed upon the poet's shoulders. It was well known that he was fond of distractions, that he treated his wife with a carelessness and forgetfulness that on the surface seem culpable in the extreme. But there must have been something to say on the other side, for La Fontaine had a large heart and deep affections. He was like an over-grown, clumsy child who required constant care from some grave, untiring competent person, one who felt both motherly and wifely love for him. He was not the kind of individual who could act the part of a model husband to a flighty young woman who knew nothing of the prosaic side of life, and required a good deal of looking after herself.

The two were obviously very ill-suited, and it may be safely assumed that there were faults and perhaps grave faults on both sides.

Marie de la Fontaine complained, according to the account of Tallemant des Réaux, that her husband frequently forgot that he was a husband at all ; but the same chronicler who wrote within the first ten years of their married life brought up a grievance on the other side. He declared that Marie was a coquette who "had behaved badly enough for some time." Only one interpretation of such a statement is possible. Believing her husband's neglect meant that he had no love for her, she flirted with another man or allowed her affections to stray. The young officer of dragoons, who had been sternly forbidden by her parents to make love to their daughter, was not persuaded to

give up his suit because relatives arranged a marriage of convenience for the maiden on whom he had set his heart.

Perhaps for a time the impetuous young man left Marie alone, but he was not a stranger to the family ; he was her cousin, and, family ties being very close in France, it would have been extraordinary if the pair had never met again after the wedding. From La Ferté Milon to Château-Thierry was not very far, and the young soldier soon appeared in the latter town and tried to carry matters on at the same place where they had been broken off. The cousins were better suited to be friends than Marie and her poet. Poignant had talents, he was keen-witted and amusing, something of a gay dog who never refused a glass of sparkling wine or a feast with any one. It was quite natural that he should regard Marie, the greatly admired, the spoilt pet of the family, with jealous eyes, and that he should think her husband something of a bore and far too old for her.

It would be unfair to take away Marie's character without facts to go upon. However much a husband may be unfaithful to his wife, she is not permitted to retaliate without losing the sympathy of all her acquaintances. Although Poignant, already a captain in the army, remained at Château-Thierry, some distance from his own people, while La Fontaine was living in the house of Mme de la Sablière, nothing conclusive can be deduced from that. La Fontaine

was secure in the knowledge of his wife's coldness, and it is very probable that Poignant found her equally cold. Some light was thought to have been thrown on the position by the story of a duel between La Fontaine and Poignant told by Louis Racine in his *Life of his father*. He represented Poignant as an elderly man and a friend of his father, which was rather misleading, for in reality the soldier was seven years younger than La Fontaine, and only five or six years older than Marie.

"This is the story I heard of the curious affair he had with La Fontaine," wrote Racine. "Some one took it into his head to ask him why he allowed M. Poignant to visit at his house every day.

"‘And why,’ said La Fontaine, ‘should he not come there? He is my best friend.’

"‘That is not what people are saying,’ replied the other; ‘they make out that he only goes to see Mme de la Fontaine.’

"‘They are quite wrong,’ he went on; ‘but what ought I to do about it?’

"‘They seem to think you should ask for satisfaction, sword in hand, of him who thus dishonours you.’

"‘Ah well,’ said La Fontaine, ‘I will demand it.’

"The next day he went to M. Poignant's house at four o'clock in the morning, and found him in bed.

"‘Get up,’ he said, ‘and let us go out.’ His friend asked him what he wanted of him and what could be the pressing business that had brought him there so early.

“‘I will inform you of that,’ replied La Fontaine ‘when we have set forth.’

“Poignant rose, dressed, went out with him, and followed him to the Chartreux, asking him many times where they were going.

“‘You shall know all about it very soon,’ answered La Fontaine. And when they had passed the Chartreux he added, ‘My friend, we must fight.’

“Poignant, surprised, asked what he had done to offend him, and pointed out to him that the duel would not be an equal one. ‘I am a soldier,’ he said, ‘and you have never drawn a sword.’

“‘That does not matter,’ responded La Fontaine; ‘people think I ought to fight you.’

“Poignant, after making futile objections, drew his sword to oblige him, quickly mastered La Fontaine, and then asked him what it was all about.

“‘People say,’ said La Fontaine, ‘that you do not come to our house every day to see me, but to see my wife.’

“‘Oh, my dear fellow,’ replied Poignant, ‘I should never have guessed that that was the cause of your anxiety, and I promise that I will never again set foot in your house.’

“‘On the contrary,’ went on La Fontaine, shaking him by the hand. ‘I have done what is required of me. Now I expect you to visit us every day, as usual, or else I shall have to fight you over again!’”

Tallemant wrote that when La Fontaine was told

that some one was flirting with his wife he replied : "Ma foi, he may do as he likes. I shall not trouble myself about it. He will leave her as I did."

His indifference caused Marie much grief. Great child of genius that he was, he forgot many things. He wanted to dream and to ruminate. His heedlessness of the little worries of everyday life affected the domestic happiness. Ways and means were nothing to him ; duties and responsibilities he thrust aside. Several stories concerning him bring forward this characteristic. Tallemant des Réaux described an incident that probably happened before his marriage. The poet's father, who was carrying on a lawsuit, sent him on an important errand, saying that a great deal depended on his celerity. La Fontaine started off, but no sooner had he reached the street than he forgot what his father had told him. He met some of his boon companions, who asked him whether he had no business to see to. "None," he replied, and went to the theatre with them.

Another time, when on his way to Paris, he had a wallet of important papers fixed to his saddle-bag. The wallet, being loosely fastened, became detached. The driver of the mails passed the same way a little later, picked up the wallet, and seeing La Fontaine asked him whether he had lost anything. Hardly comprehending his meaning, the youth looked all round him, and then said with assurance, "No ! I have lost nothing."

"Here is a bag I found," said the driver.

"Ah," cried La Fontaine, "that is my bag, and in it is all my worldly wealth." And taking it in his hand he hastened off.

Figuratively this story contains much truth. La Fontaine scattered his worldly wealth right and left, without knowing how much he had. His letters to his uncle by marriage give an account of many financial transactions. In 1653, before his wife was of age and was able to agree and ratify the act, he sold his farm at Oulchie-le-Chastel, with farmhouse, barns, stables, and some sixty acres of land, to one M. François Desmazure. Three years later he exchanged another farm at Damar for some land at Châtillon-sur-Marne belonging to his brother-in-law, and turned it into ready money at the first opportunity. Two years later, on the death of his father in the spring of 1658, he found himself embarrassed by debts, amounting to some 25,000 livres, not counting 11,977 livres due to him for money lent and interest thereon. His father's other creditors were the Pidoux family, Maucroix and Jannart. Since 1649 La Fontaine had had an agreement with his brother Claude by which the latter had ceded all his possessions to Jean in exchange for an annual payment of 1,100 livres, to become due after his father's death.

When the time came for this deed to be executed Claude repented of his bargain and desired to be let off. The poet, who did not care for this shilly-shallying,

offered to revoke the act if Claude would agree to take his share of his father's inheritance and at the same time burden himself with his share of the debts. This put the matter in quite a fresh light, and the brothers came to fresh terms in a document dated April 24th, 1658, in which Claude ceded all his rights anew, "in order to free himself from debts and charges of succession incurred by his father and mother, and to promote peace and friendship between himself and his brother," for the sum of 8,225 livres.

Overwhelmed by these responsibilities, and no more accustomed than before to suit the cost of his tastes to the amount in his purse, pecuniary difficulties led to a separation of property between La Fontaine and his wife. This deed was executed in the autumn of 1658, and gave rise to the idea that it was incompatibility of temper which had caused the estrangement. A great deal of gossip had arisen about the La Fontaine *ménage*. The poet was hardly more circumspect after marriage than before, and took no pains to conceal his infidelities. There was an affair with a certain abbess, if Tallemant is to be believed, in which La Fontaine behaved towards his wife without the delicacy of feeling which might have been expected of him. A separation of property was a very different thing from a separation *mensa et thoro*, and in a letter to Jannart dated February 1st, 1659, the poet made light of it.

Gaming and extravagance had been mentioned among his sins, and he indignantly repudiated both accusations.

His protestations erred on the side of being too forcible. It is difficult to believe that his statements agreed with the absolute truth. "What you have been informed about borrowing and gambling is quite incorrect," he wrote; "if you believed it, it seems to me that you could not have done less than to inflict a reproof on me. I deserve it on account of the respect I have for you and on account of the affection you have always shown me. I hope that another time you will be more angry with me, and if I happen to lose my money you will not laugh. Mlle de la Fontaine will not be grateful to one who gives false advice, which is as bad policy as it is self-interested. Our separation may have made some stir at La Ferté, but not much at Château-Thierry, and no one regarded it as necessary."

It is quite possible that the deed in question was drawn up simply as a means of protecting her estate from being claimed in payment of his father's debts. In this case it is not surprising to find that although the ties which bound La Fontaine to his wife were loosening they still had some interests and some friends in common.

A literary coterie was held at Château-Thierry, of which Racine, Pintrel, Maucroix, and others were members. Marie prided herself on her salon of real and pretended savants, and tried to give it the necessary air of preciousness. Racine referred to her little gatherings in a letter to La Fontaine on July 4th, 1662. "Return

to me, I beg you, the trifle of the 'Bains de Vénus.' Have the kindness to tell me what you think of it. Till then I shall waive my judgment. I dare not believe anything to be good or bad until you have told me what you think first. I make the same supplication to your Academy of Château-Thierry, especially to Mlle de la Fontaine." The "Academy" had then been in vogue at least four years, for La Fontaine mentioned it to Jannart in March 1658, when he invoked the thanks of the Academy on the head of his uncle if he should "interpret the laws in favour of Mme de Pont-de-Bourg."¹

Besides La Fontaine and his wife, his sister Anne de Jouy, now married to M. Henri de Villemontée, appears to have been one of the judges of the work of the young local poets. There is no record of what took place at the gatherings. They were probably an imitation of similar functions in town. Marie played the part of the carping critic, and La Fontaine was the lion. He read and recited his own early verses, which he could do remarkably well when he chose, or declaimed the chief passages written by another and made his own comments upon their literary merit, or perhaps more often upon their want of it.

But there were days when he took no active part in the entertainment of those assembled in his house—

¹ A certain lady in whose affairs he was interested, chiefly perhaps because she possessed a charming daughter.

days when his own desire to create drove every other thought but composition out of his head.

Once when a supper had been arranged, at which Pintrel and Maucroix were to be present, it happened that, when the meal was served, La Fontaine was missing. As this was not unusual, and he was always allowed a certain amount of latitude at meal-times, the others sat down and began to eat. Presently, to their astonishment, the door opened and the poet appeared attired in a shirt, a *caleçon*, and a night-cap, his feet being devoid of socks. With staring eyes, which appeared to see nothing, he strode through the dining-room in this unusual attire, and passed into the study, which lay beyond it. There he remained about half an hour, no one daring to disturb him. After the lapse of this interval he made his reappearance, rubbing his hands in apparent satisfaction, and, without a word to the assembled guests, he went upstairs to bed. His wife and the others were anxious to see how he had spent the time. On the table in the study, which was but dimly lit, lay a newly transcribed manuscript. It was the famous fable of "Les deux Pigeons."¹

Exaggerated as the story may be, it represents no doubt the absorption and preoccupation, accompanied by reverie, which were the invariable prelude to the outpouring of poetical genius.

This same study served La Fontaine often as a

¹ "Album des Modes," 1830: "Confessions d'un homme de cour contemporain de Louis XIV.," par MM. Dusauldroy et Charrin.

retreat where he could flee from the annoying sights and sounds of the household machinery. It is easy to picture the litter of papers lying there undusted and undisturbed, the bookcase full of the volumes he treasured—Terence, Boccaccio, d'Urfé's "*l'Astrée*," Horace, Æsop, and a number of others, the dictionaries which he used when studying the classics, the broken pens lying where they fell from his careless fingers, the medley of cast-off garments, firelocks, knives, measures, and other implements required in his trade of forestry. Probably he never remained for long tied to his desk, or shut within these walls. His muse was of the outdoor variety, and appeared most to advantage when he worked in the sunny fields. He was always ready to profit by the interests attaching to a country walk. He flitted from idea to idea like a bee from flower to flower, humming in unison with nature. Best of all he liked to sit on a tree-trunk or lie in the scented grass. Sometimes he perched himself on a boulder within view of an ant-hill, so that he could watch the busy insects at their work. The river-bank, a grassy slope, a clearing in the trees, all served him as a background for poetic thoughts.

By rights his mind should have been occupied with the details of his profession, in valuing timber, in counting the head of deer, in considering improvements in the drainage, in planning new embankments and ditches. Instead of practical details, he contemplated abstracts—the temperament of the various animals,

and their destiny in the scheme of nature. He endowed them with special qualities—the lion with grandeur and power, the fox with wealth and cunning, the ass with a heritage of simplicity, and the ape with coxcombry. To man he gave no place in this vision, assigning to him the mistakes that caused confusion and chaos in an otherwise beautiful universe. Yet to man he was to owe many good things which he found indispensable to his material welfare, and the day was close at hand when he was to solicit his favours. At that period it was the custom for poets to appeal for protection in high quarters.

CHAPTER III

FOUQUET

“**M**ONSEIGNEUR,
“I am not vain enough to hope that these fruits of my solitary hours could ever please you: the finest orchards of Parnassus produce but little that is worthy of your notice . . . yet if the subject seems beautiful enough, and I am so fortunate as to be favoured with some moments of your leisure, do not judge me by the merit of my work, but by the respect with which I sign myself your humble and obedient servant.”

When La Fontaine wrote this dedication of his poem “Adonis” to Fouquet, he was living in hopes that his verses might prove acceptable to the great personage who had but to beckon if he wished to call the most renowned writers of the day to his side. La Fontaine had done little enough till then to prove the nature of his genius. In 1654 he had published a translation of Terence’s “Eunuchus,” but this had not made him famous, and he had nothing else except a few odes, and these not of the best, to submit as an earnest of what was to come.

Great possibilities for the poet lay in the result of an introduction to the all-powerful Superintendent of Finances, who was one of the most influential patrons of the arts. At that time Fouquet's career showed no indications of its meteoric passage and disastrous anti-climax.

Born in 1615, Nicolas was the third son of François Fouquet, King's Councillor. His father's family came from Brittany, and for many generations had been connected with commerce. His mother had been a Maupeou before her marriage, a name renowned in parliamentary annals. At the age of twenty Fouquet was appointed Master of Requests. Under the auspices of Richelieu, who was reorganising the body of intendants, he was then made Intendant to the army on the northern frontier of France. Presently he was called to Paris, and came under the protection of Cardinal Mazarin. In 1650 he became *procureur général* to the Parlement of Paris, and used his influence on behalf of his protector, serving him faithfully in his misfortunes as he had done in his hours of triumph.

He claimed the reward of his fidelity in January 1653, when, the post of Superintendent of the Finances having fallen vacant, he wrote to Mazarin a letter begging for the much-sought-after appointment. Among the many candidates was Abel Servien, whose claims were equally insistent with those of Fouquet. After some indecision Mazarin divided the office between these two. Fouquet retained the post of



NICOLAS FOUQUET

procureur général and received as well the title of Minister of State. At this hour the finances of the country were greatly embarrassed. Money was necessary to carry on war and to support large armies; the coffers had been depleted by five lean years and the greed of courtiers and officials. Before long it became evident that the two superintendents were not working well together. During Servien's absence Fouquet took the opportunity of regulating the finances according to the desires of the Cardinal, in whose favour he now stood higher than before. Mazarin required money for the country, but he did not forget the needs of his own family, and brought pressure to bear upon the Superintendent to aid him in obtaining ample supplies for personal expenditure as well as in liquidating his gambling debts.

Fouquet remonstrated with his protector occasionally when the demands became too exacting, but he did not allow his own pocket to suffer whilst filling that of Mazarin. Rapidly the Superintendent built the fortunes of his family. He had received a large dowry with his first wife, Marie Fourché, who died leaving him an only daughter. He obtained an even larger sum with his second wife, Marie-Madeleine de Castille Villemareuil, La Fontaine's adorable Sylvie. On this basis he amassed enormous riches and acquired beautiful estates. He had almost as many homes as the King himself, and one was a château so beautiful that Louis XIV. felt he had nothing to equal it, and, in

his desire to possess something more superb still, begot Versailles.

Fouquet, like all those who know no limit to ambition, was not without deadly enemies, and for a long time he planned to purchase and fortify an estate to which he might retire in case danger threatened him. He was now the owner of Saint-Mandé, a comparatively modern mansion where homely comfort reigned supreme; he acquired Belle-Isle, the fortified port which was to be his refuge, and from which he took a title; and he constructed Vaux, a proud palace, worthy of François I., to the perfection of which the greatest artists in France had contributed. Leveau was the architect. Usually he was cold and austere in style.¹ Fouquet, however, had negatived the frontage of stone and brick which was then in fashion, and gave to Vaux a more ornate exterior. Le Nôtre designed the gardens. Le Brun had charge of the decorations; and though many artists executed work under his orders, unity was the result. In the three years he spent at Vaux he painted many mythological and allegorical subjects. "Venus cutting Cupid's wings" adorned Mme de Fouquet's apartment. The ceiling of the room set aside for the King was beautified by representations of Jupiter, Mercury, Mars, and Bacchus, symbols of power, vigilance, abundance, and valour. In most of the ornamental designs the squirrel

¹ The Church of Saint-Louis-en-l'Île and the famous Hôtel Lambert were designed by him.

of Fouquet's arms appeared with his famous device, *Quo non ascendit*? His initials, interlaced with those of his wife, were introduced wherever possible, in the fashion made popular by Henri II. and Diane de Poitiers at Fontainebleau.

The finished building, with its imposing and elegant frontage, its spacious courts, its vast halls and salons, was worthy of the master mind that had conceived it. It lay surrounded by parterres, canals, grottos, lawns, and plantations, melting in the distance into woodland landscape. Its grandeur inspired Mlle de Scudéry to devote page after page to it in her voluminous romance "*Clélie*," under the name of Valterre.¹

Le Brun's paintings awakened in her the utmost admiration. Inside the palace was "the goodliest hall that ever existed. Its greatness astonishes the imagination, its height surprises, and its beauty is so great that it takes away the boldness to commend it. . . .

¹ "The front of the palace," she wrote, "is built upon a mountain of architecture. . . . It hath four great pavilions at the four corners, with other courts on the two sides. The two faces which stand upon the stately moats of Valterre end in three great arcades of architecture, through which are discovered two large low wings of buildings which have been built for offices to the house, and two gardens which lie on the side of those two wings. . . . There is nothing more stately and magnificent than to see those handsome moats full of water, the second court the balustrades, the spurting fountains, and that great and magnificent perroon which crosses the whole court, rising so majestically, and upon which is seen in the middle of the palace a great porch of three stately arches supported by six pillars, which suffer the sight to penetrate through the whole thickness of the palace by three other arches opposite to the first three, and three other likewise opposite to the second; so that the sky appearing at several overtures, this sight is the more agreeable."

The sun is represented there in his palace with all the ornaments poets attribute him ; the whole base of the piece is encompassed with a great serpent representing the year ; upon this serpent move the months, the weeks and the days ;" and wonderful symbols surrounded the whole, the moon appearing through the shadow of a cloud, Venus followed by sports and laughter, Cupid, the seasons, goddesses—every imaginable symbol worked into a significant design. "But now to expound to you the hidden meaning of all these pictures," she continued. "I am to tell you that the sun represents Cléomine [Fouquet], who, according to the amplitude of his great employments, operates and shines everywhere, does good to all, and labours continually for the benefit and embellishing of the universe."

Such was the position of the man who gave to La Fontaine his first real opening in life, and such was the luxurious *milieu* into which he drew him.

In these surroundings it was not surprising that appropriate company should be selected to grace them. No one was invited who had not special qualities. The central figure was Fouquet himself, great, distinguished, a power in the land whose friends were legion. In the midst of the cares of politics he patronised letters and the arts. He collected round him doctors, savants, and poets, all men who could minister to his own versatile tastes—for he was diplomatist, financier, magistrate, student, scientist, pleasure-seeker, and a lover of beauty

in one. The greatest authors in France received of his hospitality and bounty.

Corneille, who had temporarily withdrawn from dramatic work, was urged by him to continue writing for the stage after a break of some ten years. Scarron had dedicated a comedy to the great financier in 1655, in which he addressed himself humbly to his generous, his adorable master.

The last days of the *cul-de-jatte* who was then on the point of uttering his final witty sally were sweetened by Fouquet's pension and additional gifts of dainty fare dearly beloved by the recipient. Boisrobert, author of "Epîtres en Vers," Gombauld, guest of the *salon bleu*, and author of "Cléomèdes et Sophonisbe," who dedicated his "Danaïdes" to Fouquet, Hesnault, and Loret were encouraged by material help to give their best work to the world. Thomas Corneille was on the pension list also. Molière and Quinault were especial favourites.

But the moving spirits of the day, who gave forth a seemingly inexhaustible flow of madrigals, *chansons*, enigmas, and *bouts rimés*—all of them fashionable excuses for versifying—formed a little coterie headed by Mlle de Scudéry and Pellisson, and well supported by Mme la Marquise du Plessis-Bellière and Mme Cornuel.

The Marquise was a very typical figure of the elect society which was in vogue after the Fronde. At her house the residue and extremists of the Hôtel de Rambouillet assembled. And as she was as

often in Fouquet's house as in her own, she carried her friends and the *précieux* atmosphere with her. Although she was no longer young, her name did not escape the slur which friendship with the Superintendent had cast upon those of many other women. "She represented friendship there, not love," wrote one of her defenders. She was a woman of intelligence of whom Fouquet made a confidante. Mme Fouquet showed her affection and she stood godmother to one of the children. Gossip might have passed her by were it not for the fact that her daughter Catherine received a dot of two hundred thousand livres from Fouquet on the eve of her marriage. And when the crash came she had the honour of being treated like the nearest and dearest of his household, who were exiled in various directions.

Mlle de Scudéry, too, having won the interest of all the women by her "Cyrus" (for they desired to have their portraits written), gave in "Clélie" a token of her gratitude to Fouquet. Was she not Pellisson's cherished friend? To welcome him was to welcome her, and she received from the Superintendent material benefits which were well enough paid by the fulsome flatteries and verbose eulogies of her romance.

Pellisson, who became Fouquet's confidential secretary and man of affairs, was also his literary taster. He knew all the men of letters, and had frequented all the Salons. He was Mlle de Scudéry's particular friend, and for many years the mainstay of her Saturdays. Born at Castres in 1624, he was three years younger

than La Fontaine. It was doubtless through him that Brébeuf, translator of "Pharsalia," and the other authors already mentioned, obtained the patronage of the Superintendent, and upon him devolved the duty of meting out gifts and pensions. He probably had a share in bringing La Fontaine to the great man's notice, for he had known him well in the little circle of which Tallemant and the Maucroix brothers were intimates, but this honour has always been accorded to Jannart, who, because he was deputy to the *procureur général*, had plenty of opportunities of making his niece's husband known to his chief.

In any case the person who was instrumental in bringing about the meeting was unimportant in comparison with the significance of his deed. Fouquet, the strong-willed, masterful Minister, surrounded by a crowd of sycophants, was now face to face with the budding poet, who, although full five-and-thirty years of age, was still a beginner in his art, and a dozen years younger than his patron. He looked his age. Prolific black locks framed a face that was delicate in feature, but clever and smiling. The long aquiline nose, thin upper lip above a full lower one, wide-set eyes which sparkled now with a gleam of wit, again were veiled and slumbrous, made up a distinguished physiognomy which was emphasised by the ease of his carriage and the elegance of his costume. Awaken La Fontaine's attention and he could be everything—courtier, man of the world, conversationalist, fine

gentleman. Examine him in one of his abstracted moods which occurred frequently and he seemed more like a countrified boor, careless of manner, wanting in *savoir faire*, anything but good company, and not too pleased to be disturbed in his poetic dreams. These extremes were the outcome of his genius, and those who were his friends understood and respected them, loving him equally in both.

The excitement of leaving the country for Paris, the importance of his reception by Fouquet, had put the dreamy poet temporarily on his mettle. He offered his "Adonis"—cold, artificial, monotonous as it is in parts—as a true lover offers his hand and heart to his lady fair. There was a fashion in writing at that date which had to be carefully adhered to if the author intended to please. "Adonis" contained the amorous tone and dealt with the psychology of love, which rendered it suitable to the prevailing taste. It was French enough and up-to-date enough, and yet was scented with a perfume culled from the floral treasures of the classics. The dedication extolled the man to whom it was offered :

"Fouquet, l'unique but des faveurs d'Uranie,
Digne objet de mes chants, vaste et noble génie."

With so many attributes in its favour the poem, although never regarded as a masterpiece, was sure to please, and did in fact earn for its author a pension of a thousand livres per annum, in return for which

La Fontaine was to pay in quarterly instalments of verse. In lines addressed to Pellisson he agreed to the bargain, and it must be laid to his credit that to the best of his ability he sincerely and scrupulously endeavoured to execute his share of it.

Fouquet was not wholly a philanthropist where his poets and dramatists were concerned. He wanted them to add to his grandeur. What was the use of possessing estates and palaces if their richness and beauty were not made known to the world? He intended to make them immortal in verse. Since the year 1640 he had conceived the idea of building himself the dwelling-place that should astonish all France. His workmen began in 1653, and it was 1657 before his plans had taken partial shape at last in solid stone and rich marble. They were not complete in 1661 when circumstances made it necessary for building to cease. But at least the edifice existed for every eye to behold, and it was time to publish the fact in the accustomed manner. Fouquet turned over in his mind the poets who were capable of fulfilling his desire, and his choice fell upon the one who had pictured the woodland scenes in "Adonis." No one was more fitted, he believed, to sing of the shadowed alleys, the gay parterres, the handsome outlines of the Château of Vaux.

La Fontaine accepted the task willingly enough. His contract was already signed in January 1659, and he had promised to produce verses on fixed dates ;

madrigals at midsummer, odes in October, ballads at the new year, and devout sonnets at Easter. In the meantime he laboured at the great work which was to glorify Vaux. His own remarks on its composition are of interest. Some of the descriptive fragments were begun long years before they were printed, and many were interrupted and were never completed. He asserted in a letter to his wife that he knew nothing of architecture, and that the architects, designers, painters, sculptors, and gardeners had to give him notes of their respective work in order that he might have a basis of knowledge upon which to raise his superstructure of imagery.

“The gardens of Vaux were newly planted,” he wrote, enumerating some of the difficulties which lay in his path; “so that I could not describe them in that state, since the idea of them would not have been at all agreeable, and at the close of twenty years probably not in the least like them. Therefore it was necessary to anticipate, which could only be done in three ways—by enchantment, prophecy, or a dream. The two first ideas did not please me, because, in order to carry them out gracefully, I should have plunged into a far too elaborate scheme, and the accessory matter would have bulked larger than the central or chief idea. Besides, it is not necessary to have recourse to miracle except when nature is incapable of serving us.”

Thus the “*Songe du Vaux*,” begun in 1658 and

published in 1671, was composed. In his dream the courts of the château appeared to be strewn with flowers ; he saw plants, marble statues, crystals, animals, and human beings as in a vision :

“ Il me fit voir en songe un palais magnifique,
Des grottes, des canaux, un superbe portique,
Des lieux que pour les beautés
J’aurois pu croire enchantés,
Si Vaux n’étoit point au monde :
Ils étoient tels qu’au Soleil
Ne s’offre au sortir de l’onde
Rien que Vaux qui soit pareil.”

In his verses he evoked painting, architecture, sculpture—all the arts, in fact, which had contributed to embellish this fine home.

Wandering through the grounds, he came to a lake at the foot of a cascade :

“ L’eau se croise, se joint, s’écarte, se rencontre,
Se rompt, se précipite au travers des rochers,
Et fait comme alambics distiller leurs planchers.”

Here in the deep pool a salmon and a sturgeon held a conversation with the dreamer. This is interesting, because it is one of the poet’s earliest flights of fancy in which animals were gifted with human tongues. These fish had been given alive to the Superintendent, “sent by the Lord of the Winds as an offer, in all good-fellowship, to the owner of Vaux, Oronte, his friend.”

Another of the poems was about a squirrel—a

compliment, of course, to Fouquet, in whose coat-of-arms the little animal figured—but these verses were lost. More fortunate were those describing how Sylvie, the star of Vaux, sat on the bank of the canal in her armchair, with Lambert, the musician, beside her, to watch over the dying swan, and to compare its last song with that of the human singer.¹

La Fontaine, unadaptable as he might be, worked conscientiously to give of his best in return for patronage. Mme Fouquet received his homage blissfully. He called her Queen of Hearts, he likened her to the Queen of Paphos, Amathonte, and Cythera. As a mother he paid her homage, deploring the loss of a son, and celebrating the birth of her youngest boy. She loved his eulogies, and forgave him when, by accident, he called her the mother of two cherubs when he ought to have said of three.

Between 1658 and 1661 he produced a number of

¹ Mme Fouquet was a worthy object for any poet's verses, and had been sung already by Ménage, Boisrobert, Quinault, Mlle de Scudéry, Cossart, and others. She was no longer in her first youth, having married Fouquet in 1651 at the age of twenty. She had brown hair, a well-formed figure, bright, sparkling eyes, and refined features. Her hands were beautifully shaped. It was said that she had shared with the Comtesse de Soissons the admiration of the young King. Before her marriage she had been accustomed to the fashionable life of the day, to continual fêtes, masques, and dances, in which violin-playing, versifying, swaying, gliding, and all the accompaniments of a languorous voluptuousness were practised. These things she had fostered in her husband's household as an addition to his rather more robust literary and dramatic entertainments. Every one who could contribute to these intellectual and musical feasts was an acquisition, whether he sang, danced, or wrote verses. No great genius was demanded, but the efforts must be pleasing.

effusions which, wrote Sainte-Beuve, "belong wholly to the taste of that day, the taste of Saint-Evremond and Benserade, and to the *marotisme* of Sarrasin and Voiture; but the inexpressible *something* of easy indolence and voluptuous reverie characteristic of the delightful writer is already perceptible, though much overloaded with insipidity and *bel esprit*." These were the qualities most required at a court of pleasure, where Brébeuf was composing "Poésies Diverses" and "Epigrammes," where Quinault dedicated "Le Feint Alcibiade" to Fouquet and "La Mort de Cyrus" to his wife; where Boisrobert produced his detestable "Théodore," and Madelenet addressed an ultimatum in eight verses to Fouquet, in which he declared his muse ready to sing of his palace if he received three years' pension in a lump sum. With poetasters everywhere ready to pour forth their best in the hope of winning renown and gold, it is refreshing to compare with their lines La Fontaine's *épîtres*, ballades, sixains, and dizains, which, for all his distaste of writing to order, seem to have flowed fluently enough.

His first "payment" consisted of a ballade addressed to Mme Fouquet, beginning:

"Comme je vois Monseigneur votre époux
Moins de loisir qu'homme qui soit en France,
Au lieu de lui, puis-je payer à vous ?
Seroit-ce assez d'avoir votre quittance ?"

No doubt the lady expressed her power to give him a receipt in full.

The second offering was a ballade to Fouquet; the third a poem, written at his request, on the peace of the Pyrenees and the marriage of the King, in which the poet insidiously gave proof of his master's devotion to the King's interests. Besides these, he wrote the ballade soliciting money from the Superintendent for the reconstruction of the bridge at Château-Thierry, which has a characteristic and haunting refrain :

“L'argent sur tout est chose nécessaire.”

In an *épître* he complained of having waited fruitlessly for more than an hour to see Fouquet one day, when he had gone to Saint-Mandé specially for an interview.

“Attendre une heure, et puis partir ;
J'eus le cœur gros, sans vous mentir,”

he cried pathetically.

When his patron complained of short measure, having received only three madrigals at midsummer, the poet replied with spirit in an epigram : “As M. Fouquet hoped for a larger number of little verses than he received, the following pieces were sent in addition” ; and then he proceeded to draw the great man's attention to quality rather than quantity, saying that if the poems were good he should be satisfied with their value without counting them, whilst if they were bad he should be glad to escape with so few of them :

“Quand ils sont bons, en ce cas tout prud’homme
 Les prend au poids au lieu de les compter ;
 Sont-ils méchants, tant moindre en est la somme,
 Et tant plutôt on s’en doit contenter.”

One of the best of the compositions of these years was the ballet, “Rieurs du Beau-Richard,” which was written at the time when the King’s marriage with the Infanta was projected. The most daring was the epistle to Mme de Coucy, Abbess of Mouzon, a poem that foreshadowed the “Contes” :

“Très révérende mère en Dieu,
 Que révérende n’êtes guère
 Et qui moins encore êtes mère
 On vous adore en certain lieu . . .”

and the rest of the lines, which delighted Mme de Sévigné, who became acquainted with them at an assembly or *consistoire* of *beaux esprits* held at Fouquet’s house. La Fontaine, hearing of her admiration, composed a dizain on the subject, expressing gratitude to her for placing him among the gods by virtue of her praise. Referring to his letter to the gay abbess, he wrote :

“Elle lui plut ; et cela se passa
 Phébus tenant chez vous son consistoire ;
 Entre les dieux, et c’est chose notoire,
 En me louand Sévigné me plaça.”

At the end of 1660 La Fontaine was beginning to find his bargain with the Superintendent more irksome than he cared to confess. Public events were

made to do duty as a stimulus to his muse. There is almost a pathetic note in his letter to Fouquet dated August 26, which relates the Queen's entry into Paris.

"As I shall soon be indebted to you," he began, "I thought that the magnificence of the last days would serve as an occasion for me to acquit myself of my debt, and that I could do no better than to entertain you with such agreeable material. I must inform you, then, that the State Entry did not take place without me, and that I had a place as well as many other provincials, and that this crowd of spectators was one of the things which appeared most enchanting in this affair."

And then follow the verses.

In the spring he was again at a loss for a theme. "The zeal you show for the whole of the royal household," he wrote, sending him an ode on the marriage of the Duc d'Orléans with Henriette d'Angleterre in March 1661, "emboldens me to hope that this quarter's offering will be more agreeable to you than another, and that you will vouchsafe to it the protection it needs."

It is painful to imagine to what desperate measures La Fontaine's paucity of ideas might have led him eventually had the bond which appeared to paralyse his muse lasted some years longer; but events were about to happen which gave him back his freedom, released him from the cloying effects of the life of ease he had been living, and called forth his sympathy



MOLIÈRE

and grief. His poetic gifts, feeding on this sincere and tender emotion, sprang forth anew from their source.

The cause of Fouquet's downfall was not the matter of a single day. "Cardinal Mazarin, before he died," wrote Mme de Motteville, "had given the King some advice, so it was said, against the Superintendent Fouquet. He believed him too prodigal of the finances, and he advised the King to instal Colbert under him, to watch his conduct and stop the profusion of his liberalities. . . ." Louis XIV. had long been regarding his Minister with a jealous eye.

Firstly he was suspicious about Fouquet's expenditure and magnificence. Secondly, a lady's name entered into the affair. Some supposed that the Minister attempted to supplant his royal master in the affections of Mlle de la Vallière. Such a supposition is not for a moment admissible. That Fouquet tried to ingratiate himself in the goodwill of the favourite by an offer of money, and laid himself open to the King's active anger, is probable. The story of the Sovereign's displeasure is well known. Throughout July the Superintendent's position was secure only in appearance. For the time, however, the gorgeous banquets which had become a feature of life at Vaux went on as gaily as though no ill wind could blow.

Molière was at this hour the favourite of society.¹

¹ He probably began his friendship with La Fontaine at Fouquet's court.

He had already made his name with *l'Etourdi*, and *Les Précieuses Ridicules* had not condemned him in the eyes of the very persons his satire struck at most cruelly. But he did not win the patronage of Fouquet until the close of 1660, and it was the following summer before he gave the famous representation of *L'Ecole des Maris* before the Queen of England, Madame, and Monsieur at Vaux, which Loret extolled five days afterwards in his "Muze Historique" of Saturday, July 17th :

"Foucquet, dont l'illustre mémoire,
Vivra toujours dans notre histoire ;
Foucquet, l'amour des beaux esprits,
Et dont un romant de grand prix,
Dépeint le mérite sublime
Sous le nom du Grand Cléomine :
Ce sage, donc, ce libéral,
Du roy, Procureur général,
Et plein de hautes connoissances
Touchant l'état et les finances,
Lundy dernier, traita la cour
En son délicieux séjour.

Après qu'on eut de pluzieurs tables
Desservy cent mets délectables
Tous confits en friands apas,
Qu'icy je ne dénombre pas :
Outre concerts et mélodie,
Il leur donna la Comédie ;
Sçavoir *l'Ecole des Maris*,
Charme (à présent) de tout Paris,
Pièce nouvelle et fort prizée,
Que sieur Molier a composée."

A month later the same company played *Les Fâcheux* to a still more illustrious audience.

The Court, with the King, the Queen-mother, the Duc and Duchesse d'Orléans, and a glittering crowd of nobles, courtiers, and ladies of high degree, arrived at Vaux from Fontainebleau after a journey of three hours.

The sun was high in the heavens, and until the rays began to slant the visitors took a much-needed rest. Then a presentation was made to Louis XIV. of the famous portrait of himself painted by Le Brun, which represented the King holding a bed of justice, wearing royal robes, and bearing the insignia of royal power.

After this ceremony was over, the guests walked through all the reception-rooms, and then wandered out into the grounds, where many other beautiful sights aroused their astonishment and delight.¹

When at length darkness began to fall every one returned to the château. An *ambigu* was served, the

¹ The King was taken to see the fountains, of which there were over a hundred jets spouting to a height of thirty-five feet on each side of an alley, which thus appeared to run literally between two walls of water. A thousand smaller fountains played into shell-like basins, and made such a splash that every one in childish glee declared that here indeed was Neptune's throne. The young king could not take his envious eyes off this wonderful spectacle. He studied the falling waters from every possible point of view, mounting the amphitheatre to survey the highest cascade, where he found a very beautiful device. A water-spout the thickness of a man's body gushed forth with such force and violence to a height of twenty feet "that it was one of the best things of its kind in Europe." No wonder Louis desired to emulate these marvels, first at Versailles and then at Marly.

tables being covered with exquisite and abundant dishes, and throughout the meal the sound of twenty-four violins made delightful harmonies.

La Fontaine wrote all about the affair to Maucroix, who was in Rome :

“The King, the Queen-mother, Monsieur, Madame, a number of princes and lords were there. There was a magnificent supper, an excellent comedy, a very diverting ballet, and fireworks which were not so good as those arranged for the entry.

“Tous les sens furent enchantés,
Et le régal eut des beautés
Dignes du lieu, dignes du maître,
Et dignes de Leurs Majestés,
Si quelque chose pouvoit l’être.”¹

„I noticed one thing, of which perhaps one should take no heed—the nymphs of Vaux kept their eyes on the King all the time ; his good looks enchanted them all, if it is permitted one to use this word in speaking of so great a prince.”

As Louis was leaving for Fontainebleau the same evening the musketeers were called out to accompany him, and the sound of drums rolled across the gardens. The horses of Anne of Austria’s carriage, frightened by the glare and noise, took fright and dashed into a

¹ “Every sense was enchained,
And the regal feast possessed beauties
Worthy of the place, worthy of the host,
And worthy of their Majesties,
If anything could be so.”

ditch, not without danger to the royal occupant of the coach. "I cannot believe that my narrative ought to have so tragic and unfortunate a conclusion," wrote La Fontaine at the end of his letter. The words were a premonition of disaster to come.

The truth was that Louis had refrained with difficulty from having his Minister arrested immediately in his own home. But the Queen-mother, whose influence was always on the side of restraint where her son's hot-headedness was in question, represented to him that such a return for hospitality accepted was unworthy of a Bourbon King. Her advice received the attention it deserved, and, suppressing his impulses, the Sovereign planned a journey to Brittany. Three weeks elapsed after the fateful banquet at Vaux before the blow was struck, and the arrest of Fouquet took place at Nantes on September 5th. His friends were thrown into the utmost consternation, La Fontaine amongst them.

"I can say nothing at all about what you have written touching my affairs, my dear friend," he wrote to Maucroix on September 10th. "They do not affect me at all since the misfortune which has just happened to the Superintendent. He has been arrested, and the King is furious against him to the extent that he says he has in his hands documents which will hang him. Ah, if he should do it he will be even more cruel than his enemies, especially as he has no interest like they have to be unjust. Mme de [Plessis-] Bellière

has received a note in which she is informed that anxiety is rife about M. Pellisson. If that is so, that is another great additional misfortune. Farewell, my dear friend, I would tell you much more about the matter if I had a tranquil mind, but next time I will make amends for to-day.

“ ‘Feruint summos fulmina montes.’ ”

La Grande Mademoiselle was very guarded in her version of the arrest. “The King made a journey into Brittany, and gave orders that M. Fouquet, Minister of State and Superintendent of Finances, should be arrested at Nantes. This proved so serious and protracted a business, and was attended by results so important, and in which so many people were interested, that it must necessarily become the subject of special memoirs and histories; to which I shall gladly resign the discussion of it without hazarding a single comment upon its character and bearings.”¹

¹ Mme de Motteville was more pronounced in her opinion. She wrote:

“The Queen-mother was vexed at this arrest; she liked the Minister because he took much pains to serve her, and even, with the consent of the King, sent her money, which she needed for her succour of the poor.”

Referring to the discovery of many personal letters among the Superintendent's papers, she continued: “Fouquet was much dishonoured by many things, and especially for having kept all the letters written to him, and for having left his scheme for the future abandoned to the curiosity of his enemies. By this he lost his friends; for such persons are ever fearful of dismissal. It was said of him that through this folly his day of judgment had come; every detail of his life was laid bare, his crimes, his thoughts, and those of every person who had ever held intercourse with him.”

Charged with corrupt practices, Fouquet was imprisoned at Amboise. The King's mercy was withheld. He was implacable; and if we are to believe Mademoiselle, while the case was pending Louis said to the Queen-mother: "Mother, I have one request to make. Should Fouquet be condemned to die, do not ask for his pardon."

The poet's opportunity had come. He was able to show his uncompromising fidelity to his protector. Above all things he desired the Superintendent's release. To him who loved liberty as life itself, imprisonment was a punishment more horrible than death. His loyalty went so far as to make him guilty of bad courtiership. He took it upon himself to point out to the King the duty of being merciful.

There are fine lines in his elegy on Fouquet's downfall :

"Remplissez l'air de cris en vos grottes profondes;
Pleurez, nymphes de Vaux, faites croître vos ondes.

Chacun attend de vous ce devoir généreux;
Les destins sont contents: Oronte est malheureux.

Oronte est à présent un objet de clémence;
S'il a cru les conseils d'une aveugle puissance,
Il est assez puni par son sort rigoureux;
Et c'est être innocent que d'être malheureux."¹

"Let your deep grottos resound with woe; weep, O nymphs of Vaux, swell your waters. . . . Every one expects you to fulfil this noble duty. The destinies are content: Oronte is unfortunate. . . . Oronte is now an object deserving of clemency. If he followed the promptings of a blind power, he has been punished enough by his hard fate, and to be unfortunate is to be innocent."

He charged the nymphs to plead with King Louis on behalf of the ex-Minister should he ever visit their haunts; and he took care that the King should be told of the verses. This expedient not having much effect he followed it up with an ode to Louis, begging him again to show his mercy :

“Oronte seul, ta créature
 Languit dans un profond ennui;
 Et les bien faits de la nature
 Ne se répandent plus pour lui.

 L'Amour est fils de la Clémence
 La Clémence est fille des dieux.”¹

This poem he sent to Fouquet, who returned it to him making certain criticisms. La Fontaine replied with restraint and a nice appreciation of the delicacy of the position.

“I have always believed that you would know how to preserve your freedom of thought even in prison,” he began, “and I have only to read your defence as a witness to it. There could be nothing more convincing nor better written. The annotations which you have made upon my ode could only have been prompted by a very solid judgment as well as an extremely delicate taste.”

He then proceeded to answer some of the ex-Minister's objections.

“As for the part you consider too poetical to be

¹ “Love is the son of clemency,
 Clemency is daughter to the gods.”

pleasing to our monarch, I can change this if my ode is to be presented to him ; which I have never intended it should be. . . . I composed the ode for the consideration of Parnassus : you know what a deep interest Parnassus takes in all that concerns you. Moreover it is the poetic touches which give worth to works of this character. Malherbe is full of them, even in such passages as he addresses to the King.

“And now I come to the note in which you say that I have demanded in too humiliating terms a boon that we ought to despise. This sentiment is worthy of you, monseigneur, and certainly any one who regards life with such indifference in no way deserves to die. But perhaps you did not take into sufficient consideration the fact that it is I who am speaking, I who ask a favour which is of more importance to us than to you. There are no phrases too humble, too pathetic, or too impressive to employ in this appeal. If I introduce you upon the scene, I will give you words suitable to the magnanimity of your soul. Nevertheless allow me to say that you have not shown enough anxiety about a life that is as valuable as your own.”

Fouquet's subordinates and friends were implicated in the disgrace which had overtaken their chief. Jannart was amongst them. He was banished to Limoges, where Mme Fouquet had gone before him, and La Fontaine followed in his train. An episode of the poet's life closed with his first protector's downfall.

CHAPTER IV

LETTERS FROM LIMOUSIN

IN the strict sense of the term La Fontaine never wrote love-letters, or if he did they have not been preserved for the appreciative eye of posterity. In his correspondence with Mlle de Champmeslé and with Mme Ulrich he is guilty of more than a little warmth of expression, but his interest in both ladies was a transient attraction. To Mme de Bouillon he poured forth affection mingled with reverence and respect. None of his letters to Mme de la Sablière appear to be in existence, but it may be taken for granted that the chief tenor of their contents was gratitude and sympathy.

There seems to have been no occasion in his life for the outpouring of emotion on paper addressed to one woman, and containing a revelation of a real and lasting passion. There remain his letters to his wife—the famous letters from Limousin—which have been discussed, dissected, and criticised from the day they were collected and published. In them it is vain to look for anything of this nature. They contain nothing more soulful than friendly feeling and intel-

lectual comradeship. As a disclosure of the poet's inmost self they are disappointing, but they reveal fully certain phases of his character.

La Fontaine might have said of these letters as Sterne of his "Sentimental Journey," "It will, I dare say, convince you that my feelings are from the heart and that the heart is not one of the worst of moulds," but in these writings neither author attempted to lay bare his whole heart. Both succeeded in producing a series of charming vignettes, depicting places, views, and incidents, interspersed with enlivening sketches of human nature, especially of feminine human nature. The style of writing in both cases is light, chatty, and entertaining.

La Fontaine wrote as though his journey were purely a pleasure excursion. He ignored the fact that he was following Jannart into exile and that Châteauneuf, whom he called a *valet-de-pied*, permitted by the King's kindness to accompany them on their travels, was in reality a police detective. From the first he regarded the affair as an adventure to be enjoyed to the full. "Truly it is a pleasure to travel," he wrote: "one is always coming across something noteworthy." His eyes were wide open to every possibility. Nothing escaped them. They remarked not only the scenery, but all the pretty women. He allowed himself the luxury of making strange confidences to his wife.

The glimpses of her are perhaps not the least charm

possessed by the letters. She is seen in them sitting lazily at home, indulging her idle whims, finding very little pleasure in anything, feeling herself half-neglected, yet perhaps a little relieved by his absence, chatting with her neighbours or reading favourite romances to pass the time, and talking over with the literary coterie at Château-Thierry the letters which came to hand from their distant member and which were intended to be passed round. Both were content with the temporary separation.

The first letter was written at Clamart on August 25th, 1663. The travellers had an excellent send-off. It was natural that the people who considered the King's treatment of Fouquet harsh should show sympathy with these who were made to suffer for their allegiance to him.

"We left Paris on the 23rd, after M. Jannart had received the condolences of a number of people of condition and friends," he wrote. "M. le Lieutenant Criminel acted generously, liberally, royally : he opened his purse and told us that we had only to dip into it. The rest of the neighbourhood did wonders. As it was a question of transferring the Quai des Orfèvres, the court of the palace, and the palace itself to Limoges, it could not well have been different. In short, we were overwhelmed by processions of dejected and appalled people. In spite of it all I did not weep ; which makes me think that I shall acquire a wonderful reputation for constancy in this affair.

“The humour for travelling had seized upon me some time earlier, as though I had had a presentiment of the King’s command. For more than a fortnight I had spoken of nothing else but going shortly to Saint-Cloud, shortly to Charonne, and I was ashamed of having lived so long and seen so little. Thanks be to Heaven I can no longer be reproached with that.”

There were other things with which his wife might have felt the inclination to reproach him. His interest in the women he met never slackened. “I walked, I slept, I passed the time pleasantly with the ladies who came to see us,” is very characteristic. “They tell us, amidst other marvels, that many of the Limousin women of the middle class wear little bonnets of old rose silk over a black velvet lining. If I see one of these caps framing a pretty face, I may be able to amuse myself for a while, of course only out of curiosity.” He was like a boy let loose out of school.

From Clamart they went to Bourg-la-Reine, whither Mme Jannart accompanied them. From thence they travelled by coach to Port-de-Pilles. The *valet-de-pied* was with them, and as a recompense—presumably for the annoyance of his presence—there were three ladies, a merchant who never uttered a word, and a notary who sang a great deal, and who sang very badly. In his luggage he carried four volumes of songs. Among the ladies was one who made a great impression. She came from Poitou and said she was a countess.

“She appeared young enough and had a good

figure," he wrote, "apparently she had wit also, had disguised her real name and was about to plead for a separation from her husband ; all qualities of promise, out of which I might have managed to get some fun if beauty had been met with in that quarter. Without it nothing moves me. It is the chief thing in my opinion. I defy you to make me see a grain of savour in any one who lacks it."

The time came for Jannart to bid his wife a tender adieu. The parting between two who truly loved may have evoked a sigh from La Fontaine. But if so he did not inform his wife. Perhaps haste prevented any sentimental farewells. The travellers were hurried from Bourg-la-Reine, leaving Sceaux on the right and Montléry on the left.¹

At length they reached Châtres, where they dined, then crossed the valleys of Torfou and Cocatrix, and came by this route to Etampes. Thence they traversed La Beauce, which La Fontaine thought a dreary expanse of country. He felt a great inclination to doze. His travelling companions endeavoured to enliven him, not altogether successfully ; and the "*comtesse inconnue*," being a good Protestant, wished to provoke a religious discussion. The poet, however, not being interested in this subject, fell fast asleep. After dinner he woke up sufficiently to discuss with her a topic

¹ La Fontaine was not sure of the spelling of this place. He said it should be Montlehéry when the line of the poem was too short, and Montléry when it was too long.

which was far more to his taste—namely, whether there were many pretty girls at Poitiers. His question elicited a story about a tailor's charming daughter who was almost too beautiful to bear description.

Nevertheless, La Fontaine did his best to depict to his wife her fine, full figure, her adorable neck, her clear complexion, light brown hair and bright eyes, and her well-chiselled features. In short, she was so well dowered by nature, he wrote, "that there was little left to wish for, for to say all was perfect would be to say too much."

The stars of the provinces, even those of the Court, had to yield before her; and when she was at a ball where the King was present, she effaced his brilliancy, "for the greatest suns only shine near simple stars." Besides all this she knew the romances and was not wanting in wit.

This charming fair one had made what the French call a marriage of conscience, and La Fontaine, whose views on marriage were always interesting, expatiated on this theme. "They say a ceremony took place between them," he wrote; "but the matter was kept secret. What do you think of these marriages of conscience? Those who introduced the custom were not altogether fools. One is maid and wife at the same time. The husband bears himself like a lover. While the arrangement remains of that kind there is no reason to oppose it; the relations do not raise the devil; everything comes in good time; and if it

should happen that one of them wishes to leave the other, neither a judge nor a bishop is necessary."

With reflections of this character he beguiled himself until Orléans was reached. There he looked at the statue of Joan of Arc, which gave him no pleasure. "I saw in her neither the mien, the figure, nor the face of an Amazon." Had it not been for the fact that Chapelain had written his poem on the *pucelle*, he would not have glanced at the statue, only doing so out of friendship.

From Orléans they set off towards Amboise, and this district seemed to La Fontaine far more delightful than La Beauce. The first stop was made at Cléry, where a little adventure occurred to La Fontaine. He went to look at the church, and, returning, mistook a strange hotel for his own. By a mere chance he did not order dinner. "Having gone into the garden for a walk, I became so engrossed in reading Titus Livy that a good hour passed before I reflected on the demands of my appetite. A servant of the house warning me that I had made a mistake, I hurried to the place where we had put up originally, and arrived just in time for the meal."

From Cléry they went to Saint-Dié, La Fontaine walking part of the way on a lovely road bordered by hedges. The hotels there offered but poor accommodation, and the grumbles of the Countess gave rise to a story of Potrot and the lady of Nouaillé, which the poet borrowed from the "Avantures du baron de

Fæneste," by Agrippa d'Aubigné. He did not appear to be at all afraid of shocking his wife, for the story is quite as broad as his "Contes."

He described Blois with much enthusiasm. "I think it would be difficult to find an aspect more smiling and more agreeable. . . . The manner of living there is very pleasant, either because it has always been so in the past and the climate and beauty of the country contribute to it, or because the residence of Monsieur there brought polish in its train, or the quantity of pretty women. I had some pointed out to me, as usual. They wished to show me some humpbacks as well—a common thing in Blois, according to what I have heard tell, and still more common in Orléans. I believe that Heaven, who is a friend to these individuals, sends them into this locality in a spirit of mischief, for they say humpbacks are never lacking ; but an old tradition gives another reason for this."

And then he wrote verses on the subject, which had a bearing on the physical geography of La Beauce and Limousin. La Beauce having once an abundance of mountains, like the rest of France, and the town of Orléans being full of happy, delicate, lazy people, who desired to walk at their ease, they complained to Fate, and begged once, twice, thrice that they might be saved the trouble of ascending, descending, and mounting again, since mount after mount and never a plain made them require three times the breath of the

ordinary man and legs of iron. They said they wanted a country which had neither hill nor mountain. To this Fate replied :

“Vous faites les mutins ! et dans tous les Gaules
Je ne vois que vous seuls qui des monts vous plaignez !
Puisqu'ils vous nuisent à vos pieds,
Vous les aurez sur vos épaules.”¹

Then La Beauce was levelled, and humpbacks were born. And because there were too many humps to go round, and the celestial beings did not quite know what to do with the residue, they were about to distribute them in the neighbouring districts :

“Lorsque Jupiter dit : Épargnons la Touraine
Et le Blésois ; car ce domaine
Doit être un jour à mon cousin.
Mettons-les dans le Limousin.”²

“You can believe this story or not, as you please,” the poet concluded.

After a very good breakfast he went to see the prince's residence. His description of the château is very characteristic. “Thank God,” he cried, “there is no symmetry between the three styles of architecture ! Neither the first, the second, nor the third has the slightest relation or congruity. The architect

¹ “You are mutinous, and in the whole of France you alone complain of mountains. Since they hurt your feet, you shall have them on your shoulders instead.”

² “When Jupiter cried : Spare Touraine and the people of Blois ; for this domain will one day belong to my cousin [Gaston d'Orléans]. Put them in Limousin.”

avoided it as much as possible. The exterior of the part that François I. built pleased me most of all. There are tiny galleries, tiny windows, tiny balconies, and small ornaments without regularity or order. That gives an effect which is pleasing." There was no time to see the interior, and the poet regretted greatly not being able to inspect the chamber in which Monsieur died. "In fact," he continued, and his point of view is the more interesting because he presently accepted a post in the widow's household, "there is no one who does not owe great veneration to the memory of this prince. The people of these districts mourn for him with cause. Never has rule been more gentle, more peaceful, more happy than his. And really such princes ought to be born a little oftener, or, at least, not die." To his regret he also failed in his wish to see the garden, into which Gaston had put much love and labour.

La Fontaine wrote his third letter in instalments, and finished it on September 3rd, 1663. "See," he declared, "the hold you have over me. It only wants a quarter of an hour to midnight, and we have to get up before sunrise to-morrow. . . . Nevertheless I am spending the hours which are so precious to me in spinning yarns for you—I, who am a child of sleep and idleness. No one dare speak to me, after that, of husbands who are sacrificed to their wives! I shall claim to surpass all of them, and I shall not believe you know how to behave towards me if you do not

wish me as many good nights as I shall have bad ones before our journey is ended."

Considering the object of the journey, the next letter had a special and a mournful significance. Fouquet, who had been first at Angers, was then at Amboise, before being taken to Vincennes and the Bastille.

"We arrived at Amboise early enough, but in very bad weather," he began. "I did not hesitate to occupy the rest of the day in seeing the château. I am not going to amuse myself by drawing a plan of it for you. You know, without any further detail, that it is situated near the town on a rock, and appears enormous. In the direction of the country the ground round about is more elevated. . . . The view is grand, majestic, of an immense extent. The eye sees nothing to interrupt it, no object which is not the most agreeable imaginable. . . .

"But of all this poor M. Fouquet can never obtain a moment's enjoyment during his stay. They have blocked up all the windows of his room, and have only left a hole in the roof. I begged to be allowed to see him ; a sad pleasure, I confess to you, but still I begged it. The soldier who conducted us had not the key. In default of it I stayed a long time looking at the door, and made them tell me the way in which the prisoner was guarded. I would willingly describe it to you, but the memory of it is too distressing.

" ' Jours sans soleil,
Nuits sans sommeil.' "

“If night had not come they would never have got me away from the place.”

The stay in Amboise was perhaps fortunately not prolonged. La Fontaine's grief was distracted by other and more cheerful sights than the prison walls which held his kind patron.

The next day the travellers turned their backs on the Loire.

As they approached Limousin they saw a group of gipsies, who came towards them dancing, frolicking, showing off their bare shoulders, and dragging behind them some detestable old hags of duennas, who, wrote the poet, giving a touch of Eastern colour to his descriptive account, “looked at us with as much mistrust as though they were young and beautiful. I shuddered with horror at this sight, and could eat nothing for two whole days after it. Two white women followed. They had clear complexions, good figures, a mediocre beauty, and were by no means angels, to speak figuratively, since so many of the others were really demons.

“We greeted these two with great respect, as much on their own account as on that of their skirts, which were far richer than the whole turn-out warranted. The rest of their clothes consisted of white capes and little English hats of coloured taffetas trimmed with silver lace. They returned our greeting with a slight inclination of the head, walking on with the gravity of goddesses, and hardly deigning to glance at us,

simple mortals as we were. More duennas followed them, no less ugly than those in front, and the caravan was brought up by a friar in the rear. The baggage was carried in the midst of the procession, partly packed in wagons and partly borne by beasts of burden. Four empty carriages and some servants followed.

“‘Non sans écureuils et turquets,¹
Ni, je pense, sans perroquets.’

“The procession was under the escort of one of the bodyguard.”

When at length the travellers reached Port-de-Pilles they separated. The Countess sent a servant into the town with a message addressed, not to her husband, but to one of her relatives, to announce the news of her arrival, and to give instructions that a coach and suitable escort should be sent for her.

Only five leagues away lay the château of Richelieu, which La Fontaine longed to visit. “Even Germans go several days’ journey out of their way for it,” he wrote. M. de Châteauneuf, the *valet-de-pied*, offered to accompany him. “I took him at his word,” continued La Fontaine, “and thus your uncle remained alone, and went to sleep at Châtellerault, where we promised to rejoin him very early the next morning.”

From Limoges on September 12th he wrote a description of Richelieu, “in spite of his ignorance in

¹ A peculiar breed of small dogs.

matters of architecture." Having described some of the peculiarities of the château, he confessed to his wife that they were not the most remarkable. "But what does that matter," he added, in a rather supercilious tone, "as I know your humour: a gallantry about such things would please you far better than observations either profound or curious. Anybody who looked for learned observations in the letters I write would be terribly deceived."

Among the statues were busts of Tiberius and Livy. He described them to his wife because she had learnt something about these classic people from reading Calprenède's romances. He was also much interested by several of the portraits, and, in one room, saw "the whole history of the nation." And then he added flippantly: "They did not take pains to forget the persons who triumphed over our kings. Do not imagine I am referring to the English or the Spaniards. I am speaking of people far more redoubtable and powerful; in one word, the Jocondes,¹ the charming Agnes, and those vanquishing illustrious ladies without whom Henri IV. would have been an invincible prince."

He described in coarse terms a copy of Titian's Magdalen, and then apologised for not having spoken more devoutly. "It is not my way," he added, "to reason on spiritual matters. I have regarded them with but ill-grace all my life."

¹ Monna Lisa, called La Joconde, said to be mistress to François I.

He was most pleased of all with the lovely grounds of the château.

He loitered down one of the alleys, and scarcely had he taken ten or twelve paces before he felt himself forced by a "secret power" to begin writing verses to the glory of the great Armand.

He had composed some twenty or thirty lines, and grown oblivious of all his surroundings in the beauty of his subject, when his train of thought was interrupted.

"I should still be at the end of the alley where I began the verses," he concluded sadly, "if M. de Châteauneuf had not come to tell me it was late."

His next letter began with another sigh. "It would be a fine thing to travel if it were not necessary to get up so early." The digression from the ordered path was at an end. It was necessary to rejoin Jannart at Châtellerault as speedily as possible.

At this place a pleasant surprise awaited him. He found a family of relatives, the Pidoux, to whose long noses reference has already been made.

They were a wonderful race, and the picture that La Fontaine gave of the interior of his cousin's household is quite typical in its way and all the more interesting because he apparently envied the old man's domestic joys.

"They assured us," he wrote of the Pidoux race, "that most of them lived a long time, and that death, which is a very common accident among

other people, was thought to be abnormal in those of his family. I should very much like to know whether this is the truth. However it may be, my relative of Châtellerault remains in the saddle for eleven hours at a stretch without inconvenience, although he is over eighty years of age. Particular characteristics of his, which his connections of Château-Thierry do not share with him, are that he loves to hunt and to play tennis, knows the Scriptures and writes controversial books. Besides he is the gayest man you have ever seen, and thinks very little about business matters, except those that contribute to his pleasure. I think he has been married more than once ; the present wife is well made and has certainly many good points. One thing about her pleased me—she flirts with her husband and lives with him as though he were her lover ; and I approve of one thing about her husband—he goes on having children by her. Happy old age is therefore possible in which pleasure, love, and the graces keep one company until the end. There are not many such, but there are some, and that is one of them. To tell you what family this relative has, and how many children, is impossible because I did not notice exactly, my disposition never having been to bother much about these little people.”

Besides this relation, La Fontaine discovered that he had a cousin at Poitiers, but was not able to visit him.

“ Poitiers,” he wrote, “ is what is called properly a

large straggling town, is badly paved, full of scholars, abounding in priests and in monks. As a recompense there are a number of beautiful women, and one makes love there as willingly as anywhere. It is the Countess who told me so. I was sorry not to go through it ; you will easily guess why."

He was to have one more gallant adventure during his journey.

At Bellac, a "disagreeable village with shocking streets and ill-built houses, where the kitchens were on the second story and the sauces that were brought forth from them were not worth being curious about," he met at the inn "a young person who was rather pretty." He continued unblushingly: "I teased her about her headdress. It was a kind of cap with ear-pieces of the smallest size bordered with gold lace two or three fingers in width. The poor girl, thinking she was doing the right thing, went to fetch her ceremonial cap to show me. Beyond Chavigny they hardly speak French, but this girl understood me without much trouble. Pretty little speeches are understood in every land, and are fortunate in having their own interpreter with them. Bad as was our lodging, I spent quite a good night there. My sleep was not disturbed by dreams as it generally is. If, however, Morpheus had brought the innkeeper's daughter to me, I think I should hardly have sent her away again. But he didn't."

At length the travellers reached their destination. La Fontaine thought the people of Limoges were as

refined and polite as anybody in France. "Men have wit in this country," he wrote, "and women have fair complexions ; but their costumes, manner of living, occupations, and compliments about every mortal thing do not please me at all." He concluded the account of his voyage with some descriptive lines :

"Ce n'est pas un plaisant séjour :
J'y trouve aux mystères d'Amour
Peu de savants, force profanes ;
Peu de Philis, beaucoup de Jeannes ;
Peu de muscat de Saint-Mesmin,
Force boisson peu salulaire ;
Beaucoup d'ail et peu de jasmin :
Jugez si c'est là mon affaire."

His letters to his wife throw sidelights on the poet's character which cannot be gathered from the Fables. Here he appears in his brightest and most natural vein, the man rather than the poet, the pleasant companion whose capacities for friendship and love are great, who, although able to soar to altitudes of imagination, is content to interest himself in the little things of everyday life, to feel joy or sorrow with those about him, to communicate to them his sympathy and understanding ; who is ready to burst into laughter at the gaiety of the Pidoux home circle, or into tears at the anguish endured by his imprisoned patron,—who, in short, has a mood for every occasion and is lovable in them all.

CHAPTER V

TWO DUCHESSES

LA FONTAINE returned from Limoges at the close of 1663 or early in 1664.

About this time he became connected with two very dissimilar women—the sparkling, joke-loving Duchesse de Bouillon and the morose, devotional Duchesse d'Orléans, widow of Gaston.

There is no definite information available as to the manner in which the poet came to be a member of the latter's household, but it is known that he succeeded one called Curault as her gentleman-in-waiting. The brevet giving him the appointment was dated July 8th, 1664, and was signed by Desprez, her *chevalier d'honneur*. He took his oath of fidelity a week later between the hands of the Comte de Saint-Mesme, *lieutenant-général*.

M. Amédée Renée¹ suggested that it was through the kind offices of Mme de Bouillon that La Fontaine was introduced to the Court of the Luxembourg ; but as he, in company with a number of the poet's biographers, confused Henriette d'Orléans with Marguer-

¹ " Les Nièces de Mazarin."

ite—that is to say, the reigning Madame with the Dowager-Madame—the assertion must be taken as suggestive but not conclusive.

The appointment was at all events a curious one. Usually the duties which devolved upon gentlemen-in-waiting to a royal personage were numerous and varied. They served at table, accompanied their master or mistress to functions, ceremonies, the promenade, or upon any occasion when an escort was necessary. They received the oaths of fidelity of all officers of the chamber, and instructed the ushers whom to admit to the royal presence and to whom to refuse admittance. They regulated expenses and organised household services. They acted as envoys when important messages or dispatches were to be carried. They supervised the royal playhouses, made arrangements for funerals, planned amusements, and studied the entertainments of guests. Apart from these active duties they were supposed to present a dignified appearance and contribute to the imposing grandeur of the retinue.

La Fontaine could not have been of use in any one of these capacities, and it is improbable that the Dowager-Madame required half the services described. The appointment was probably a purely honorary one, a compliment to the poet's talents. He was proud of the title conferred upon him and made use of it to the last, long after Marguerite d'Orléans was dead. It was necessary for her to employ many retainers if

she wished to remain in the princely habitation she had made her dwelling-place.

The trappings and impedimenta of royalty might be cumbersome and expensive, but it was impossible to dispense with them. Something was due to sentiment. La Fontaine had held a place of importance in the great abode of the rich Superintendent. His name conferred a cachet of culture, literature, and the arts. The reason for his appointment might be found here.

He soon discovered, to his great grief, a terrible difference between the gay life at Vaux and the almost funereal *ménage* of the Dowager-Duchess. Madame thought of little but devotional exercises. She "punctuated her prayers with continual meals, by way of curing herself of the vapours, which were much increased thereby."

Imagine La Fontaine constrained to be the witness of vapours or enveloped in an atmosphere of devotional exercises ! Even the promise of plenteous meals would hardly compensate him for such monotonous surroundings. Imagine him trying to be at his ease in the presence of this extraordinary woman whom Monsieur had recklessly married without the consent of Louis XIII. when exiled from France in 1633. No one makes the incongruity of mistress and gentleman appear more obvious than Mme de Motteville in her account of the eccentric lady who grew pale at the sight of boots made of Russia leather.

“The princess never made long journeys,” she wrote, “whether from crotchets or real illness ; she seldom went out, declaring that the least agitation made her faint. I have sometimes heard Monsieur laughing about her, and telling the Queen how she took the communion in her bed rather than go to the chapel, which was close by, without her having, apparently, any real illness. When she came to see the Queen, once in two years or so, she had herself carried in a chair, but with such fuss and affectation that her arrival at the Palais-Royal was celebrated as if it were a little miracle. Often she would get only three steps from the Luxembourg, when she had to be taken back, being attacked by some of the many ills she said she felt, but which never appeared. She ate bread which she carried in a provision pocket ; and Russia leather boots were her mortal enemies. . . .

“She was handsome in the features of her face, which were beautiful and well formed ; but she was not agreeable ; her whole person lacked I know not what that was pleasing ; but as for actual ugliness, she had it only in her teeth, which were already decayed. It was said of this princess that she was beautiful without being so, and had intellect, but seemed to have none because she made no use of it. She was fat and thin both ; her face was full and her bosom handsome, so her women said, but her hands and arms were very thin. It must also be said that she had not a fine figure, but neither was she deformed. In short, all

contrasts were collected in her in a surprising manner ; and it was impossible to speak of her except with an ambiguity to be used about no one else.

“It was also true that Monsieur loved her and did not love her. He lived with her and treated her well ; he never deliberately annoyed her ; and when he thought her dissatisfied or grieved he did all he could to cure her little thoughts.”

Gaston was not without his own peculiarities. His character was as variable as that of a weathercock. He blew now hot, now cold, always under the impression that he knew his own best interests, although he acted more often than not entirely contrary to them. Apparently he regarded his wife as an object to be pitied and indulged. Yet behind her back he was not so charitable, and to others he held her up as an object of derision.

“Monsieur often laughed at her delicacies and whims with the ladies who served her,” continued Mme de Motteville, “and even with the Queen, to whom he used to say that she was visionary, that her piety was ridiculous, that she never talked except to her confessor, whom she consulted about the merest trifles. Neither did he spare her favourites, who were among the silliest creatures in Paris. He said, speaking of them, that persons of merit, lacking discernment, ought to be ashamed to be on good terms with them ; that her Court was decried because those who were obliged to see her, on account of her



MARGUERITE DE LORRAINE, FIRST WIFE OF GASTON D'ORLÉANS

rank, found there none but persons unworthy of her favour and approbation."

If this portrait be true to nature, Marguerite d'Orléans must have been a very uncomfortable mistress, and as unsuitable in that relation as La Fontaine was in the one of gentleman-in-waiting. He loved good cheer and high society. She was all for mourning and for curtailng expenses if her own convenience and prestige were not diminished thereby. According to Mademoiselle, she was as close-fisted as Gaston was open-handed and lavish. But Mademoiselle was terribly prejudiced against her stepmother, and she never attempted to conceal her contempt. La Fontaine was fully aware of the ill-feeling between the two, which began before the death of Gaston.

Even in his lifetime, when he was in exile, wrote Mademoiselle, referring to her stepmother's treatment of the family, although his Court was much decreased, "she paid no attention to his affairs, and never even saw her daughters for more than ten minutes in the morning and the same in the evening ; when she would say to them very little else than 'Hold up your head ; keep yourself straight' ; and this was the extent of the instruction she ever afforded them."

But Mademoiselle's dislike was deepened by her stepmother's conduct at the time of her father's death. "I was informed," she wrote, "that all the Lorraines who had gathered round her had observed, 'Madame will be very rich now that Monsieur is dead, and she

will do what she likes with her wealth.' On the day of Monsieur's death she broke up her establishment, sending for all the dishes and plates to have them locked up, and ordering all the doors to be shut every evening, which constrained the priests who were watching the corpse of Monsieur to withdraw : not one was left, and consequently there could be no prayers, although it is the custom to pray without ceasing near the bodies of persons of elevated rank. Nay, her economy extended to a degree of penuriousness rather alarming, for there were no lights to burn and no wood for the fires, although it was very cold weather."

The real cause of Mademoiselle's ill-feeling was that, instead of remaining indoors for forty days without leaving her chamber (hung with black, as was the custom), Madame left it at the end of ten days to go to Paris, where she installed herself at the Luxembourg Palace.¹

Mademoiselle had her establishment in the same building, which, commodious as it was, seemed hardly big enough to hold the two households. Even the gardens had to be divided by a partition, with trees on either side, in order that the occupants might not meet when out walking.

One portion of the palace was the residence of the dreary Dowager, her three young daughters, Mlles d'Orléans, d'Alençon, and de Valois, their prim and sober servants, and the little dog Mignon.

¹ Then often called the Orleans Palace.

La Fontaine, whose duty it was to prove in prose and verse his devotion to the Duchess and her daughters, poured forth some of his complimentary sentiments in an epistle to the pet :

‘Petit chien, que les destinées
T’ont filé d’heureuses années !
Tu sors de mains dont les appas
De tous les sceptres d’ici-bas
Ont pensé porter le plus riche :
Les mains de la maison d’Autriche
Leur ont ravi ce doux espoir :
Nous ne pouvions que bien échoir.”

The donor of the dog Mignon was Madame’s eldest daughter, Marguerite, here described as one who had thought of wielding the richest sceptre in Europe, because she was to have been the wife of Louis XIV.¹ Chagrined because the plan fell through, Mlle d’Orléans agreed to marry the Grand-Duke of Tuscany. The wedding took place in April 1661, and was productive only of unhappiness to the bride. La Fontaine’s allusion to the arrangement proposed by Anne of Austria and Mazarin of marrying Louis XIV. to his cousin seems out of date if the lines were not written earlier than 1664, because both parties had chosen different consorts three years before.

The poem went on to regret the melancholy which was habitual to Mignon. What was the cause of it ? Apparently it was impossible to be happy in the

¹ For a long time she was known by the title of Little Queen

loveless atmosphere which pervaded both departments of the Palace.

“D’où vient donc que ton cœur soupire ?
Que te faut-il ? un peu d’amour.
Dans un côté de Luxembourg
Je t’apprends qu’Amour craint le suisse ;
Même on lui rend mauvais office
Auprès de la divinité
Qui fait ouvrir l’autre côté.”

La Fontaine himself was out of his element, owing to this cold air of disdain. His post in her stepmother’s household prevented him from becoming one of the favoured guests at Mademoiselle’s receptions.

Ever since 1661, wishing to annoy the Dowager-Duchess and amuse her half-sisters, she had given dances and entertainments of all kinds in her apartments. There was gaiety enough at that time, romping games and flirtations, music performed by violins, and feasting dear to the heart of the young people who gathered there. The handsome Charles de Lorraine was the most sought after amongst the men, and one of the prettiest girls was Louise de la Vallière.

Madame had been the first to bring her to Paris, and Mademoiselle had known her well in earlier days. The faces changed before 1664, but the salon was as gay as ever. The Grand-Duchess of Tuscany was no longer there, Mlle de la Vallière,

already a mother, was by then at the height of her power, and Mlle de Valois was married to the Duc de Savoie. But Mademoiselle, being a rich and independent princess, still entertained according to her own standard of profusion.¹ Cards she had never sanctioned, but she was growing daily more ambitious from the literary point of view. Segrain, Chapelain, and Cotin were among her guests. She was old-fashioned, however, and remained faithful to the cult of Corneille, decrying Racine and his school, and probably also the work of La Fontaine. She would not have praised anything that originated in the household of her stepmother, certainly not verses written on the occasion of a marriage in the family, for she was of a jealous nature, and thought her own marriage should have been arranged before that of any of her step-sisters.

Preparations were then being made for the wedding of Madame's last unmarried daughter, Mlle d'Alençon, and this happy event gave La Fontaine the opportunity of delivering himself of an appropriate sonnet. In May 1667 Mlle d'Alençon, upon whom Mme de Sévigné bestowed the title of *la Guisarde beauté*, became the wife of the Duc de Guise.

To this duke La Fontaine dedicated his collection of poems, entitled "Fables nouvelles et autres poésies," which was published in 1671. "They are a tribute," he wrote in the accompanying epistle, "which I

¹ See "Famous French Salons: La Grande Mademoiselle."

have pleasure in offering to your Highness. For, without admitting that you are master of my leisure and of every moment of my life, since these are devoted to the august and wise Princess who has thought you worthy to possess the heiress of her virtues, you received my respects in so charming a manner that I was wholly yours before I dedicated these works to you. Neither the volume nor the individual is worthy of your consideration . . . but you exercise over all hearts a violence which it is impossible to resist."

The volume contained another of La Fontaine's somewhat meagre contributions in poetical language to the aggrandisement of his royal patroness. Mme de Guise's *dame d'honneur* was called Mme de Poussé or Poussay, and to her daughter La Fontaine addressed a sonnet. This young lady was destined to become a nun, but owing to her extraordinary beauty she had been brought to Court by a scheming mother at a moment when the King's favour was being sought through the aid of many ambitious women. The attention of Louis was drawn to her by Mademoiselle. Her presence at the Luxembourg tended to enliven this gloomy abode for a time, attracting many of the younger and gayer members of the Court.

"L'innocente beauté des jardins et du jour
Alloit faire à jamais le charme de ma vie,
Quand du milieu d'un cloître Amarante est sortie.
Que de grâces, bons dieux ! tout rit dans Luxembourg."

The poet sunned himself and basked in this unexpected interval of gaiety and smiles. But it was not to last. Amarante, if she did not return to her cloister, at least took her departure from Court. The King's eye had fallen on some one more to his fancy, and he withdrew the light of his presence from the abode of his aunt and cousins. Once more the Luxembourg was the scene of gloom and dissension, which caused the poet continual regret and discomfort. He was like a fish out of water. Mademoiselle pursued the feud to its bitter end. Although Madame had, under pressure, given her stepdaughter back her own apartments, Mademoiselle never forgave the encroachment. She boasted that she always held her head very high in her stepmother's presence, that she "quarrelled with her very often and despised her exceedingly."

When the old lady lay upon her deathbed in 1672, Mademoiselle refused to bid her farewell, which conduct, said Mme de Sévigné, "was neither Christian nor heroic." The excuse that Mademoiselle gave was that she had not been asked to go, and "as I had not to ask pardon of her, but it was I who had been ill-treated by her, I feared that if I went she would believe that I wished to rejoice at seeing her in that condition; that which I should not have done, being Christian, and not liking to see death because of the dread I have of it."

Her stepmother's end gave her undisputed possession of the Luxembourg, and she immediately ordered the

trees which divided the garden to be cut down, and called in Le Nôtre to remodel it on the plan of the Tuileries.

There is no reason to believe that La Fontaine mourned the loss of his patroness. The years spent in her employ would have been dull for him had he not been able to avail himself of society which was far more to his taste, and which he found in the artistic, literary, and exotic circle of Mme la Duchesse de Bouillon.

It is not known where and when he first made the acquaintance of this fair lady, who wielded over him and his writings a subtle influence as strong as, if not stronger than, that of any other woman, Mme de la Sablière included.

Among the many personal acts by which Cardinal Mazarin made his presence felt at the French Court, one that was not without important consequences was the importation from Italy of the five famous sisters, his nieces, known as the Mancinis. They all possessed charms and seductions which played havoc with the hearts of the susceptible Frenchmen who sought their society. The King himself grew enamoured of them, beginning with the eldest, Olympe, transferring his affections to Marie, the second, and perhaps in turn to Hortense, whose beauty was the most classical of all. The youngest of the five was Marie-Anne, who, at the age of fifteen, married the Duc de Bouillon, and very shortly afterwards became patroness of La

Fontaine, of whom she is credited with saying that he was a *fablier* who bore fables as naturally as a tree bears fruit.

Marie-Anne was only six years of age when she was brought to France, but she speedily won the affections of all at Court by her high spirits and precocious wit. Letters in verse were much in vogue at that day, and she composed effusions of this character and sent them to her uncle at a very early date. She soon established a reputation for a fine taste in *belles lettres*. She loved luxury, had extravagant habits, played cards with the best, and did not scruple to ask for means with which to indulge her whims and fancies. Mme de Venel, who kept strict watch over the doings of the fair sisters, her charges, wrote to Mazarin: "Mlle Marianne, if she were a preacher, would never preach, save to beg for money."

The lively young lady appealed to her uncle in a witty manner well calculated to produce the desired result. "I am dying of fear," she wrote in April 1660, "lest my pockets may be lined with the skin of the devil, for the cross always escapes from them"—the cross referred to being that which adorned the reverse side of the pistole. But she had not to wait long for money of her own. On Cardinal Mazarin's death in March 1661 she received a legacy of 600,000 livres. A year later she was married to the Duc de Bouillon, Grand Chamberlain and Governor of Auvergne.

Her upbringing at Court had not been without evil

results. She had been spoilt and petted and made much of until it was a wonder that her head had not been turned altogether. She had taken part in all the festivities, dancing in the ballets which were a favourite form of amusement at the early age of twelve, composing verses, and helping the others to spread the artistic and luxurious tastes introduced by the family from Italy. Even in her girlhood she aspired to become the patroness of poets and artists, and to gather round her a salon of gay wits and sparkling conversationalists. The opportunity to carry out these ideas came after her marriage in 1665, when the Duke, her husband, went to fight the Turks under Montecuccoli, and she had the propriety to withdraw from Court during his absence and retire to their country seat at Château-Thierry. In this princely domain she had a free hand in organising one of the most brilliant gatherings of French wits, adding to their gaiety and spirit the charms of the *mode italienne*.

Under the spreading elms of the great park she sat surrounded by her ladies, while reading and recitation were provided for their entertainment. Upon the subject of the chosen books it is as well not to say too much. Amongst them were probably the stories of Ariosto, Pogge, and "The Decameron." "Florence certainly never offered to Boccaccio," wrote Amédée Renée, "among the group of women at the villa a more gracious and attentive listener than Marie-Anne."

The diversions of the day were varied and elaborate in their apparent simplicity, consisting of promenades, pleasure-hunts, ballets, serenades, concerts, fêtes, and collations. Ladies set forth arm-in-arm with their chosen cavaliers, and after a simple walk through glades and meadows arrived at some chosen, secluded spot, where a banquet was laid all unexpectedly, as though it were a surprise or accident. Such affairs were called *cadeaux*.

“Fêtes et bals, sérénades, musique,
Cadeaux, festins, bien fort apétissoient.”¹

Music was a great feature of the concerts and collations, especially the soft harmonies of the stringed band. At the ballets and serenades, poems and playlets, as well as music, formed an integral part. This made the entertainments very costly, for the best of musicians and poets were retained to compose suitable subjects, which always had a basis of imagery, such as fairy grottos and enchanted isles, the power of love and the beauty of the seasons, nymphs, and goddesses, and other far-fetched symbols.

The fashionable pleasure-hunt was a travesty of the real sport, and usually took place in the wide groves and among the thickly-growing trees of the park. The ladies dressed themselves in fine clothes, and were far more anxious to preserve their appearance and avoid violent exercise than to take part in chasing the stag.

¹ La Fontaine, “Contes : Belphegor.”

A substantial meal, followed by repose and relaxation, ensured them against the slightest dangers of fatigue.

In the midst of these sylvan joys, Mme de Bouillon had every opportunity of cultivating the arts. She was clever, and by no means satisfied to be merely an onlooker. She composed verses, recited, read, and handled discussions with a wit and fervour that were the soul and life of the company she gathered round her.

To this paragon of virtuous intelligence and beauty was introduced the indolent, careless, happy-go-lucky La Fontaine.

The dainty little society lady to whom he was presented instinctively felt that she would speedily discover in him traits of a very different kind than were apparent from a cursory inspection of his uncouth exterior and *gauche* manners. In spite of the years at Vaux, he still had about him many signs of the rustic. She thought he would be improved by the polish of civilised society. Her interest in him was keen, and she set herself the task of studying his tastes, his aims, and his capabilities, endeavouring meanwhile to set him at his ease by her kindness and encouragement. She believed that in the congenial atmosphere of her house some of the latent treasures of his mind might come to fruition.

La Fontaine responded to the influence of her charming personality as the harp resounds to the touch of sympathetic fingers.

He thought her beautiful, for her eyes were keen and sparkling, and her smile fascinated all who saw it by the power of its radiance. Benserade had said of her hair it was the longest, the finest, the most silky ever seen. Her figure was perfect, her hands and feet small and beautifully shaped, her skin soft and glowing, and—attraction upon attraction to our poet—her nose was short and *not* aquiline. Describing the delights of her home, her society, and her person, he wrote :

“ Peut-on s'ennuyer en ces lieux
Honorés par les pas, éclairés par les yeux
D'une aimable et vive princesse
À pied blanc et mignon, à brune et longue tresse ?
Nez troussé, c'est encore un charme selon moi.”

He called her “la mère des amours et la reine des grâces” ; at the risk of confusing her with her own sister and with other women on whom he had bestowed the same *nom de Parnasse*, he named her Olympe, and said that even Venus yielded her place to her. Saint-Evremond, almost equally poetic, declared that her charms were reflected in all she did and in all she said. She loved fine books, good engravings, and beautiful jewels. Her critical sense was strongly developed, and she was named the “sovereign arbitress of literary fashions.” Saint-Simon said of her she was a “tribunal with which people were forced to reckon.” No one took a greater interest in the drama and in literature than she, and ordinarily her judgment was reliable.

The question as to whether she inspired the poet to write the "Contes" has been much debated. He had already made one or two essays in this style of literature, if not before he knew her, at least before she was old enough to express a taste for anything so broad. But no forcing-house could have matured them more quickly than her salon.

In Paris, at the Hôtel de Bouillon, the gayest spirits of the day assembled and perfect freedom of conversation was permitted. Light stories, from "The Decameron" onwards, have always been invented in order to amuse a little group of people who had more time on their hands than discretion; so Marguerite de Navarre wrote "The Heptameron" to amuse King François I., her brother, and his nobles when they were tired of the day's hunting; so Louis XI. when the chase was done, gathered his boon companions round the huge log fires at Genappe and told the coarse tales of "Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles."

The society of that day was ripe enough for the "Contes"; and if Mme de Bouillon was to be blamed for fostering licentious conversation in her drawing-room, was no one to blame for the unwholesome atmosphere in which she had been reared? It was upon her that the jest was practised at Court in her childhood of placing a new-born infant beside her in bed and accusing her of being its mother. The details are too far removed from the manners of to-day and too well known to need repetition, but the incident

throws more light than many words on the style of humour then in fashion.

The Duchess insisted that La Fontaine should follow her from Château-Thierry to Paris, and he, nothing loth, hastened to obey her gracious commands. Already he was acquainted with her brother, the Duc de Nevers, who dabbled in literature, and her brother-in-law the too popular Cardinal. He also met in her salon the two Princes de Conti, Turenne, Corneille, and Molière, and among the ladies Mme de Sévigné, her daughter, Mme de Lafayette, and Sidonie de Courcelles.

Mme de Bouillon protected La Chapelle, Boyer, and Pradon, pitting Pradon's "Phèdre" against the play by Racine, to the disadvantage of her favourite. Benserade and Segrais were of her company. She kept her house open for those who were her friends, from early in the morning. "No woman has ever busied herself less with her toilette," wrote Saint-Simon; "few fine and singular faces like hers had less need of artificial aid and were suited so well by everything: always and at all times she wore adornments and precious stones."

Describing her salon, the same author said: "There was banqueting morning and evening, gambling of all kinds went on at the same time; and the men were amongst the greatest, the most illustrious, and often the best company. She remained a very audacious and daring creature, and in consequence always embarrassing and dangerous." It was said that horoscopes,

astrology, prophesying, occultism, and magic philtres occasioned scandal in high places. In later days she suffered exile for her indiscretions, but at the time when La Fontaine was reading his first published "Contes" in her drawing-room she was at the height of her dominating wit and beauty—a queen of her own court, a personage who was never tired of assuming the regal air.

La Fontaine she regarded as a worthy subject. His fame was spreading far and wide. From the day of publication of the "Eunuque" in 1654, nothing he had written had appeared in print, except one small volume of poems, until 1665, when the first "Nouvelles en vers tirées de Boccace et de l'Arioste" saw the light of day. Copies were on sale in December of that year; but as privilege had been applied for as early as January 14th, 1664, when Mme de Bouillon was about seventeen years of age, it seems unlikely that she had had much to say in the matter of their publication. Edition followed edition, however. Four volumes appeared in 1665, four more in 1666, and another five before the 'seventies. Three editions of "Fables" came out in 1668. In that year too were issued two impressions of "Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon," with a graceful dedication to the Duchess.

"For a long time," he wrote, "Monseigneur le duc de Bouillon has loaded me with favours, all the more great that I merit them little. I was not born to follow him into danger; that honour is reserved for destinies



MARIE-ANNE MANCINI, DUCHESSE DE BOUILLON

more illustrious than mine : all I can do is to wish him glory and to watch his success from my study." And after singing the praises of her bellicose lord, he continued : " While you listen with joy to the recital of his fine deeds, there is likewise ravishing delight in hearing what all France is saying of your beauty and your soul, of the vivacity of your wit, of your good nature and good temper, of the friendship you have entered into with the Graces. It is such that no one believes you can ever again be parted from them. This is only a fragment of the praise they offer you. I wish I had a store of words precious enough to complete this eulogy and to prove to you, more perfectly than I have done hitherto, with how deep a passion and zeal I remain your humble and obedient servant."

The friendship with Mme de Bouillon was to extend over many years. At the time it began he was a member of an intimate literary circle of which he wrote in this same work "Psyché."

CHAPTER VI

AN IMMORTAL QUARTETTE

“**F**OUR friends, whose acquaintance had begun upon Mount Parnassus, held a kind of club,” wrote La Fontaine, in his introduction to “*Les Amours de Psyché*,” “which I might call an academy if they had been a larger number, and had considered the Muses as much as they did pleasure.”

These meetings in Boileau's bachelor apartments formed a very salutary contrast to those in the Duchesse de Bouillon's salon, for in the former the poet's work was in keen competition with that of other gifted men, whose criticism rarely erred on the side of leniency, whilst in the latter he had no higher aim than to please the gay society of which it was composed, and he received nothing but complimentary speeches and unqualified approval—a form of adulation ill-adapted to stimulate him to do his best work.

“The first thing they arranged,” he continued, describing the object of the meetings in the Rue du Vieux Colombier, “was to do away with all formal conversation and everything that savoured of academic discussion. When they met together and had talked

of their amusements, if chance led them to touch upon any question of science or of literature, they took advantage of the occasion. But they never dwelt for too long on one subject, flying purposely from one thing to another, like bees which settle upon diverse kinds of flowers on their way. Neither enmity nor malignity was allowed to be heard amongst them. They adored the works of the ancients, but did not refuse to the moderns the praises that were their due. They spoke of their own performances with modesty, and gave each other honest advice whenever one of them happened to be seized with the malady of the age, and wrote a book—which rarely happened.

Polyphile (by which name he designated himself) was most given to this breach of good taste. When he had been working for a long time on the adventures of *Psyché*, a subject which seemed eminently suitable to form a delightful narrative, he at length communicated his plan to his three friends, not in order to inquire from them whether he should continue, but as to the manner in which he should proceed. One gave him advice in one form, another in another. He took what he liked and ignored the rest. When the work was completed he asked for a meeting-place and a day in which to read it.

It was suggested that the friends should take a walk, and they went to Versailles. After dining and a meander through the château and grounds, they found

a secluded corner. Polyphile cleared his throat and began his story.

In "Psyché" La Fontaine attempted the impossible. Louis XIV. had recently had Versailles built for him, and the architects, artists, and landscape gardeners were still at work upon the palace and the grounds. La Fontaine, wishing to repeat the triumph he had enjoyed when Fouquet chose him to sing of the beauties of Vaux, introduced a flattering description of Versailles into his account of the adventures of Psyché. The result was a halting and maimed narrative. Some of his descriptions are tedious ; for instance, that of the celebrated grotto of Téthys, to which he devoted a quite disproportionate number of lines. On the whole, the prose part of the work is better than the poems, but one or two passages in verse are excellent, especially the song overheard by Psyché in the Palace of Love, Psyché's prayer to Pluto and Proserpine, and the hymn to Volupté, which closes the work, and in which he describes his own tastes :

"Volupté, Volupté, qui fus jadis maîtresse
Du plus bel esprit de la Grèce,
Ne me dédaigne pas, viens-t'en loger chez moi ;
Tu n'y seras pas sans emploi :
J'aime le jeu, l'amour, les livres, la musique,
La ville et la campagne, enfin tout ; il n'est rien
Qui ne me soit souverain bien,
Jusqu'au sombre plaisir d'un cœur mélancolique.
Viens donc ; et de ce bien, ô douce volupté,
Veux-tu savoir au vrai la mesure certaine ?

Il m'en fait tout au moins un siècle bien compté;
Car trente ans, ce n'est pas la peine."¹

In spite of its obvious faults, "Psyché" brought its author some success during his lifetime. Two editions appeared in the year of publication (1669), a third after his death in 1700, a fourth in 1701, a fifth and sixth in 1703, and a dozen more before the close of the eighteenth century. Molière composed an opera on the same subject, which was played early in 1671 at the Tuileries. The King commanded the play so hurriedly that Molière had to get help from Corneille in order that it might be finished in time. The King's command for an opera on "Psyché" was said to arise from a very frivolous cause. A set of scenery depicting the infernal regions was in the storeroom of the theatre, and had never been used. It seemed a pity not to have a play written to fit it. Perhaps when La Fontaine presented Louis XIV. with his poem, the King saw the possibilities of the scene in Hades, and gave his orders.

To-day the chief interest in La Fontaine's "Psyché"

¹ "Delight, Delight, who didst as mistress hold
The finest wit of Grecian mould,
Disdain not me; but come,
And make my house thy home.
Thou shalt not be without employ:
In play, love, music, books, I joy,
In town and country; and, indeed, there's nought,
E'en to the luxury of sober thought—
The sombre, melancholy mood—
But brings to me the sovereign good.
Come, then," etc. E. WRIGHT's *Translation*.

is centred in the flashes of light thrown here and there on the quartette of friends, Racine, Molière, Boileau, and himself. Racine was called Acante, Boileau Ariste. Acante "loved gardens very much as well as flowers and shady spots. Polyphile resembled him in this ; but one might say that the latter loved all things. These passions, which filled their hearts with a certain tenderness, spread through their writings and formed their principal characteristic. Both of them inclined towards lyrics, with this difference, that Acante's were more moving, Polyphile's more florid in style." Acante's tears flowed on little provocation.

Ariste was described as serious without being tiresome ; and the fourth, Gélaste, was very gay. This was confusing. Molière was not very gay, and yet Gélaste was said by some to be a disguise for Molière. Moland¹ took the trouble to prove it, and then a few years later changed his opinion and decided that Gélaste represented Chapelle, the careless, epicurean scoffer who was frequently admitted into the society of the immortal quartette.

A solution of this little mystery has been offered by Mesnard, who cannot credit the possibility of La Fontaine having erased the name of Molière from among his closest friends, even if he wrote of them after the disagreement between Racine and Molière. He prefers to imagine that originally the poet designed Gélaste with Molière as a model, but that, owing to the

¹ Editor of "*Œuvres Complètes de La Fontaine*," Paris, 1872.

dramatist's estrangement with the author of "Andromaque," La Fontaine diplomatically eradicated some of his most recognisable traits and substituted flippant wit more suited to the style of Chapelle. Moland's strongest arguments against his earlier view was that Molière expressed vulgar sentiments and mediocre ideas. After the description of Venus travelling by sea, he is made to say, "J'aymerois mieux avoir veu votre Deesse au milieu d'un bois, habillée comme elle estoit quand elle plaïda sa cause devant un berger." That, wrote Moland, is certainly not a trait by which anybody can recognise Molière. Perhaps fresh light is thrown on this point by a manuscript note made by La Fontaine in his own copy of the first edition of "Psyché," now in the British Museum. He crossed out this passage and wrote the words "ostez cela dans une reimpression." But his wishes in this respect were never carried out.

In 1664, when the literary gatherings first took place, no cloud had yet arisen on the horizon of one of the most interesting friendships in the annals of authorship. All that was best in French literature of the seventeenth century was represented. Molière was the dramatic painter of human nature, Boileau the master satirist, Racine the lyric genius, La Fontaine the philosophic elegaist and gay tale-teller. It was a coalition of genius. There were four gifted men anxious to produce masterpieces. Molière was already famous; the other three had their laurels still to win.

In character no four men could well be more diverse ; probably their differences helped to cement the bond between them. In personal appearance, too, they were not in the least alike. Molière, born in 1622, was neither too short nor too lean. His figure was tall rather than small, his carriage noble, his legs well shaped. He walked gravely, with a very serious air. His nose was large, his mouth wide, his lips compressed, his complexion dark, his eyebrows black and well marked, and he moved them in a manner which made his face very comic. Moreover he was an actor from head to heels. He was able to change his voice. He was able with a smile, a wink, a nod to make himself understood more quickly than a great talker would have done in an hour.

Racine, who was much younger, had the head of an Apollo on his shoulders. His expression was poetic, and beneath an impassioned mask was an inspired soul, full of warmth and glowing passion. He had something feminine, even coquettish, in his composition. In the height of his struggle to found a new school, he never gave way to imprudent actions, but rather disguised his real feelings under a veil of fine phrases. When his critics became too free with their stinging lashes, he allowed his rage full sway, and if they goaded him further he withdrew the play they had found displeasing.

Boileau, born in 1636, had acquired a professional air which clung to him for the rest of his life. His

powers of satire were an effective weapon, a kind of moral ferule with which he was able to chastise his friends. By some it was regarded as a sceptre which he swayed with power in a kingdom peculiarly his own. He presided over the meetings at his house in a pedagogic manner calculated to inspire respect in those who visited him. At times his roguish face broke into a gracious smile which gave him the appearance of one who gloated over some secret achievement. Utterly oblivious to the fashions, he wore his own hair, which was black, only covering it as a precaution against cold when the thermometer fell below freezing-point, and then with a fair wig. He was a little asthmatic, rather deaf, neither tall nor small, and guided by his intellect more than by his emotions. Gidel, his biographer, gave a detailed account of the interesting character of this writer :

“A little abrupt,” he wrote, “but candid, sincere, and courageous ; always ready without a doubt to lecture Chapelle on his passion for wine, La Fontaine on his neglect of his wife ; but noble and generous, above the little rivalries which found a resting-place in the irritable soul of Racine and ended by causing him to quarrel with Molière ; quick to defend those whom he loved, throwing himself with energy into the midst of a struggle ; drawing upon himself all the enemies of reason and of taste. If he makes an attack upon his friends about the feebleness or imperfection of their works, at least he listens to their observations

upon his, profits by them, and shows them an example of modesty. Was he ever unjust? It must be agreed, with d'Alembert, that he was never unjust except in error, by prejudice, in a temper at the worst, but never out of spite. He had no more meanness to reproach himself with in his writings than in his actions. His literary probity equalled his moral probity. It often happened to him that he had to reconcile himself with his enemies, but he never lost a single friend. To the end he remained a rallying centre for men of letters, a host whom society people loved to visit in his retreat at Auteuil. As he was in the Rue du Vieux-Colombier 1663-4, at the Croix-de-Lorraine in 1665, so he was all his days."

In 1664 La Fontaine had not yet published the poems for which he was beginning to be known. Racine's "Nymphes de la Seine" had won him praise and money from the King, and had appeared in print in 1660. An "Ode sur la convalescence du Roy" was issued in 1663, and was soon followed by "La Renommée aux Muses" and "La Thébàide ou les Frères ennemis." Boileau, who had left the *salon bleu* more satiric than he entered it, in spite of Mme de Rambouillet's refining and ennobling influence, had written but not yet published some five or six satires. Molière was already known by "Les Précieuses Ridicules," "L'Ecole de Maris," "Sganarelle," "L'Etourdi," and "Les Fâcheux."

When the meetings of these kindred spirits did not

take place in the Rue du Vieux-Colombier, or in the country, they were held in one of the famous cabarets where literary men used to assemble to discuss their writings in the presence of men about town, drinking the cheering cup therewith.¹

Two or three times a week the four supped together and criticised each other's work and the host's entertainment. They loved the pleasures of the table, of wine and good cheer; they revelled in the quip, the crank, the literary *bon mot*. Boileau, loving freedom of speech, allowed his tongue a loose rein; Racine listened, open-eyed in wonder, to the experiences of the older men. The fabulist sat on in glorious ease and idleness, not too attentive, sometimes growing sleepy, yawning, lolling, and blinking his eyelids. At other times he would wake suddenly to rap on the table with impatient fingers, to shrug his shoulders, or make some gesture of dissent—to add a pointed remark, a quick sally, or a series of brilliant fireworks which took the wind even out of Boileau's sails. D'Olivet described his peculiar habits :

¹ The favourite places frequented by the writers of the seventeenth century were the Mouton Blanc, kept by the widow Bervin, near the Cemetery of Saint-Jean—where Racine composed his "Plaideurs" in company of Boileau and the advocate Brillhac, and where parodies were written "glass in hand"—and the even more famous Pomme de Pin, in the Rue de la Licorne, about whose host, Crenet, Boileau made a verse reflecting on his vintages :

"Un laquais effronté m'apporte un rouge bord,
D'un Auvernat fameux qui, mêlé de lignage,
Se vendait chez Crenet pour vin de l'Ermitage."

“He rarely began a conversation ; and ordinarily he was so preoccupied that he did not know what the others were saying. He dreamed of quite different things, but could not say of what he was dreaming. If, however, he found himself among friends, and the discourse grew animated, owing to some pleasant dispute, especially at table, then he suddenly grew warm, his eyes lit up ; it was the real La Fontaine, and not a phantom clothed in his appearance.”

That was in the society of several ; with one companion he was still more reserved. “Nothing was to be drawn from him in a *tête-à-tête* discussion, unless the conversation turned upon something serious and interesting for the one who was speaking,” continued d’Olivet. “If people who were in trouble or in doubt made up their minds to consult him, he not only listened very attentively, but—and I know it from people who have proved it—he softened towards them ; he sought for expedients, he found them ; and this poor fool, who for his life could never take the right step for himself, gave the best advice in the world.”

A thing that was difficult to believe about him was that in his talk he never allowed a free or equivocal expression to escape him. Many tried to get him to tell tales like the ones he wrote. “But he was deaf and dumb on such matters ; always full of respect for women ; giving full praise to those who possessed

reason, and never showing contempt for those who lacked it."

In the company of men he was not so circumspect, but his good-nature always predominated, and he never wilfully hurt the feelings of any one. With Molière he was on the best of terms until the day of the latter's death. "C'est mon homme," he wrote, praising "Les Fâcheux," with which he was charmed.

The dramatist had perhaps the most important part in the four-sided friendship. The fame he had already won gave him certain rights. Big man as he was, he sat at the table with the others, tolerant and contemplative, peopling the room with visions of the quaint but life-like figures created by his great brain. If he began to talk it was to discuss a situation brought about by the clash of character—to inquire whether his friends in their experience had come across such or such a combination of circumstances. At other times he grew more personal and discussed the flesh-and-blood interpreters of his mental images, praising this member of his troupe, and describing the difficulties of actor-managership. Then Racine's attention was fully awakened, and he asked question after question, for his hope was to write for the stage; his ambitions soared higher than the gallant sonnets which in his youth he had hidden so carefully from his friends and teachers at Port Royal and the Jansenists.

Three of these four lives were chequered fitfully

with success, grief, disappointment, and bright gleams of joy. La Fontaine alone possessed the placid temperament which allowed all storms to beat round his head unheeded. Under Molière's success lay the tragedy of his unfortunate marriage. Side by side with Boileau's intellectual gifts, which won him well-deserved fame, were the infirmities of his body, a source of continual suffering which in his solitude at Auteuil threatened to destroy the balance of a clear judgment and left him old and morose, bereft of every illusion. Vexation, discord, and strife mingled with honour and success in the lot of Racine, who had to throw off the swaddling-clothes of his religion and to stand up against the whole strength of the school of literature of which Corneille was the master. La Fontaine in contrast found everything for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Only now and again an occasional sigh escaped him because he had not money enough for his needs.

These four giant figures were not alone on the heights of Parnassus. Towards the pinnacles attained by genius the lesser literary climbers aspired.

Among the smaller fry were Chapelle, author of "Le Voyage," Chapelain, author of "La Pucelle"; Boileau's brothers,¹ who were writers; Valincour, who succeeded Racine at the Academy, and to whom Boileau dedicated his eleventh satire; Furetière, whose famous dictionary was soon to injure him in the eyes of his

¹ He was called Despréaux to distinguish him from them, taking the suffix from a small *prés*, or meadow, at the bottom of the garden.

fellow Academicians ; the Abbé Le Vasseur, and the flute-player Descoteaux.

From such a company many good stories and clever speeches might be expected, but no one appears to have taken the trouble to put on record the good things that were said, or perhaps these brilliant writers were more sparkling when they used their pens than their tongues. A few anecdotes have survived, and are to be found chiefly in the works of Louis Racine and d'Olivet.

One day when La Fontaine was at Boileau's house, Racine and Gilles Boileau being present, there was a long discussion on the subject of Saint-Augustin. La Fontaine sat torpid and quiet, taking no part in it. All of a sudden, however, the name of Saint-Augustin aroused his attention. "Do you think," he said, addressing himself to Abbé Boileau, "that Saint-Augustin had more wit than Rabelais?" The doctor, inexpressibly shocked by this question and fixing him with a stony gaze, replied coldly, "M. de La Fontaine, do you know that you are wearing one of your socks inside out?" The hit at the poet's slovenly habits went home.

"If he spoke he wished to discuss Plato, of whom he had made a careful study in a Latin translation," wrote Louis Racine, telling another story of the poet. "He sought to learn about the ancients in conversation, and made use of my father for this purpose. He advised him to read some portions of

Homer in a Latin translation. It was not necessary to point out the beauties to him, he seized upon them himself. All that was beautiful struck him at once. My father took him to *Tenebrae* one day, and perceiving the service appeared long to him, gave him, in order to occupy his mind, a volume of the Bible containing all the prophets. He happened on the Jews' prayer in Baruch, and unable to help admiring it said to my father, 'Baruch was a great genius Who was he?' The next day and several days afterwards he asked every one he came across in the street whom he knew, 'Have you read Baruch? He was a great genius.' "

La Fontaine went by the name of "le Bonhomme," and occasionally he was the butt for his companions' jokes, owing to his preoccupation. Racine and Boileau on one occasion carried their jesting beyond the limits of good-fellowship set forth by the society. "Those two fine wits," said Molière to Descoteaux, who was present, "may plume themselves mightily on their acumen, but they will never put the Bonhomme in the shade."

Another incident proves that La Fontaine was not thin-skinned.

Sometimes nothing could awaken him from his lethargic reveries; at others it was exceedingly difficult to break any thread of ideas with which he was inspired. At one of the suppers a conversation was proceeding on the dramatic exigencies, and he



RACINE

condemned "asides." "Nothing," he said, "is more contrary to good sense. What! the pit is supposed to understand that which an actor is not expected to understand, although he is close behind the one who is speaking? Absurd!"

As he grew very warm whilst thus expressing his feelings and it was impossible to make him hear a word, Boileau tried to arrest his attention by repeating over and over again in loud tones, "La Fontaine must be a pretty rascal, a great rogue." But La Fontaine took no notice at all of this abuse. At last they all burst out laughing, and this interrupted his train of thought.

"What are you laughing at?" he said.

Boileau replied gravely: "Fancy! I was abusing you at the top of my voice and you never heard me, although I am near enough to touch you, and you are astonished that an actor does not hear an aside that another actor says on the boards."

Boileau constituted himself corrector of bad sense and bad grammar in the writings of others. A penalty for mistakes was inflicted. A copy of Chapelain's "Pucelle" was kept on the table in the centre of the room. Verses of this indigestible poem had to be read through by those who had broken the rules. The usual punishment was twenty lines, but a whole page was equivalent to a sentence of death. Chapelle, who knew no rule except that of following his own sweet but erratic pleasure, was victimised in this manner so

often that at last he revolted, and seizing the object of torture flung it away with a gesture of despair and to the danger of all who were within range.

Boileau's brother Pierre was unguarded enough to speak ill of the "Pucelle" one day before its author.

"It is all very well for you to judge the poem," cried the angry Chapelain, "you who do not know how to read."

"Pardon me," answered the other: "since you began to have things printed, I know how to read far too well."

Boileau called Chapelain "Patelin" in one of his satires, and again the poor man grew enraged. "Why did you disfigure my name?" he cried. Usually, however, he was even-tempered, and forgave the unpleasant things that were said of his verses. Boileau was entreated by his friends not to attack the author of the "Pucelle," because he had influence at Court, was protected by M. de Montausier, and sometimes received visits from M. Colbert. But the satirist was not to be deterred from honest criticism for snobbish reasons like this. "Supposing the Pope himself called on him, would he write better poetry on that account?" he inquired impatiently.

Boileau never softened his speeches to his friends. Racine resented his corrections; even La Fontaine, with all his mildness, grumbled sometimes, but Molière was more accommodating, and had been known to alter certain expressions in his plays when

the satirist insisted they showed signs of preciosity. The only person before whom Boileau dropped his high-handed manners was the King himself, and then he became remarkably servile. When appointed historiographer he announced to Louis that he had been born a year earlier than his Majesty solely for the purpose of singing of the marvels of his reign; and when the King ran some slight risk of being wounded in his first campaign, the author threw himself at his knees, crying, "Please, Sire, be more careful, lest an accident should occur which would cause the premature conclusion of my history."

Chapelle was the only one who could get the better of Boileau. When the former, bubbling over with a gaiety he owed to the wine-cup, met the latter in the street, Boileau began to lecture him in his most censorious manner on the dangers of taking more than was good for him.

"One moment," cried Chapelle, "come in here. We shall be more comfortable, you to speak and I to listen."

The place he indicated was an inn. No sooner were they inside than Chapelle ordered drinks, Boileau began his discourse, and by the time they left, Chapelle, better trained by habit, was obliged to conduct the poor stumbling Despréaux to his home. The latter refused to forgive the former for his joke.

Boileau did not wish to have his satires printed; he preferred to read them to a select company. On

one occasion the company assembled at the Hôtel de la Palatine, whither the hostess, Princess Anne de Gonzague, had invited Mme de Sévigné and her daughter, Mme de Lafayette, the La Rochefoucaulds, the Barrillons, and several other important people. Again the friends met, at M. de Brancas's house, in the presence of Mme Scarron and Mme de la Sablière. This time he read his satire "Du Festin," written on the subject of a banquet given at Château-Thierry which he had found so dull that he left it to walk with La Fontaine, who had not been invited. The reading was not appreciated, and to his discomfort he was obliged to stop in the middle, but he retrieved his reputation with his next satire, "Sur l'Homme."

La Fontaine did not escape this fashion of being invited to read his works before an admiring assembly, but it was only rarely that he complied with the request. He resorted to a subterfuge at length in order to escape annoyance, taking with him a companion called Gaches, to whom he pointed, saying, "I don't know any of my own poems, but Gaches will recite them to you."

Racine was asked to read his "Alexandre" at the Hôtel de Nevers, where Mme de Guénégaud entertained the *beaux esprits*, and at the same place Boileau again delighted the company with his satires.

One of the most noteworthy entertainments of this character took place in Ninon's salon in the Rue des Tournelles, where Molière read "Tartuffe" to a most

illustrious audience, consisting of La Fontaine, Racine, Chapelle, Boileau, Saint-Evremond, Lulli, the Prince de Condé, the Duc de Saint-Aignan, Coulanges, the Marquis de Sévigné, Bachaumont, and a number of ladies, among whom were Mmes de Sévigné, de Saint-Aignan, de Coulanges, de Lafayette, de Thianges, and de la Sablière. At the beginning of the evening there was music. Ninon sang a song, accompanying herself upon the lute. The words she sang were from the pen of Bachaumont, and the music by Lulli. Another song was written by Chapelle, in which he had expressed the devotion offered to the incomparable Ninon by all her friends. After the play there was dancing. Ninon's salon was always gay. After she had rejected the advances of the Duc de Vendôme's brother, the Grand Prieur, because she detested him and his dissipated ways, she was no longer willing that La Fontaine should visit her, because he was a frequenter of the Temple where the Grand Prieur held his orgies.

With Mme de Lafayette and La Rochefoucauld, the poet was on the best of terms. For the former he wrote some little verses, ending in the refrain, "I love you, love me always," which he sent to her with a present of a game of billiards; to the latter he addressed a fable, extolling the Book of Maxims. He often visited Mme de Lafayette's house, where he met Huet and Segrais. Mme de Lafayette was a very clever woman, and her taste was exceptional. She liked

d'Urfé's "Astrée," and the wonderful pastoral allegory was a particular bond between her and La Fontaine. It consisted of a number of volumes filled with light and elegant verbosity. The most interesting thing to-day about "Astrée" is its author. He fell passionately in love with a certain beautiful woman called Diane de Châteaumorand, with whom his elder brother had contracted a marriage of convenience. He managed to get the marriage annulled, and obtained permission from the Pope to wed his ex-sister-in-law.

The name of "Astrée" was almost a household by-word: all the habitués of the *salon bleu* swore by it, la Grande Mademoiselle tried to live up to it—and failed—and its teachings were sometimes held up to ridicule. One day at Conrart's house Colletet, who was there, said in the presence of a number of women, "What do you think we do, Claudine and I, when we wake up in the middle of the night?" All the women ostentatiously lowered their eyelids. "We read 'Astrée,'" he went on unblushingly.

This same Colletet was a wag in his way. He had received benefactions from Fouquet, and La Fontaine had probably become acquainted with him at the Superintendent's house. He made a habit of marrying his servants, and when it came to the third one, Marie Soyer, who was given the more euphonious title of Claudine, her husband had the brilliant idea of winning a literary reputation for her. Little verses were produced in her name and read to her friends, and the

poets of the time replied with sonnets upon her beauty and the facility of her muse. La Fontaine was amongst the number of those who addressed madrigals and other compliments to her; but when her husband died suddenly and it was found the bird had lost its notes, the imposition was discovered, and La Fontaine composed a poem which showed her up to the world :

“ Les oracles ont cessé ;
Colletet est trépassé.

Dès qu'il eut la bouche close,
Sa femme ne dit plus rien ;
Elle enterra vers et prose
Avec le pauvre chrétien.”

Being left very badly off, Claudine had to make shift for a living, and was not always very scrupulous how she came by it. Several members of the family, her mother amongst them, were dependent on her bounty. Three days before her death she went to Furetière to beg for money, giving as an excuse the reason that she wished to pay for her mother's funeral expenses. The money proved a fatal temptation. She drank, and expired suddenly herself. Then her mother, who all the time had been in good health, went to Furetière and asked him for money wherewith to bury her daughter. “Nonsense, you are joking,” he said. “It is you who are dead, not she.”

The longer La Fontaine lived in Paris the more he

became engrossed in the friendships he made there, and he went less often to Château-Thierry.

The estrangement between himself and his wife continued. D'Olivet said of their separation: "He went away from his wife as often and for as long as possible, but without indulging in animosity or causing a scandal. When he felt that he was nearing the end of his endurance, he calmly took himself off and went quietly to Paris, where he spent whole years, only returning to his house to sell some part of his property."

Vergier appeared to think that the distaste was all on La Fontaine's side. He compared the poet to Ulysses, but drew one distinction between them :

"Ce héros s'exposa mille fois au trépas ;
Il parcourut les mers presque d'un bout à l'autre,
Pour chercher son épouse et revoir ses appas.
Quel péril ne courriez-vous pas,
Pour vous éloigner de la vôtre ?" ¹

Some of his friends did everything in their power to bring about a reconciliation, but their best efforts were in vain. The poet found life very comfortable in the houses of the great, where everything was made easy for him. He did not wish for a domicile which he might have found it necessary to keep going by his

¹ "This hero exposed himself to death a thousand times whilst traversing the seas from end to end to find his wife, whose charms he longed to see once more. What perils would you not run to get away from yours ?"

own unaided exertions. In 1676 he sold the old house in which he had been born, and his wife had to move into a smaller one lent to her by the Duc de Bouillon.

Boileau and Racine were not easily silenced about his relations with Mme de la Fontaine. They insisted that the poet should pay her a visit. Louis Racine described the result :

“When Mme de la Fontaine, wearied with living with her husband, withdrew to Château-Thierry, Boileau and my father said to La Fontaine that the separation did him no credit, and made him promise to take the journey to Château-Thierry, in order to become reconciled with his wife. He left in the public coach, arrived at his house, and asked to see her. The servant, who did not know him, replied that her mistress had gone to benediction. La Fontaine went to see a friend, who invited him to supper and to sleep, and entertained him for two whole days. At the end of that time the public coach returned to Paris. He took his place in it, and thought no more about his wife. When his friends saw him back in Paris they asked him if he had been reconciled with her. “I went there to see her,” he said to them, “but I did not find her at home. She had gone to benediction.”

La Fontaine must have visited Château-Thierry once or twice every year whilst he was still Commissioner of Waters and Forests, for he did not give the work up until many years after he had become

accustomed to town life. A great deal of trouble occurred in connection with his profession.

At the time of his marriage La Fontaine was one year more than the age¹ at which it was possible for him to inherit his father's appointments, but he only became *maître triennal*. His father died in 1658, and then he took full charge of the "maîtrise particulière ancienne et la maîtrise particulière triennale des eaux et forêts du duché de Château-Thierry et de la prevosté de Châtillon-sur-Marne."²

In the meantime a change had come about in the administration of the laws of forestry in the district.

In 1656 steps were taken to bring about the suppression of the *maîtrise des eaux et forêts de Château-Thierry*, and estimates were made out of the amounts to which the officials were entitled. In August 1661 La Fontaine was awarded two sums, one of 14,000 livres and one of about 12,600 livres. With this valuation the poet was not altogether satisfied. He thought he should be offered an additional indemnity for his work as *capitaine des chasses*—overseer of the chase,—a post that included among its duties the right to have delinquents arrested and to seize arms, clubs, dogs, nets, and traps prohibited by law. This the royal commissioners refused to consider, and negotiations continued until 1666.

¹ Twenty-five years.

² A number of documents show that he fulfilled his duties satisfactorily from 1656 to 1661.

In 1662 the poet was still attending provisionally to his forestry work.

“J'étois lors en Champagne,
Dormant, rêvant, allant par la Campagne,”

he wrote to the Duc de Bouillon. He was growing more lazy than before in the discharge of his duties, and complaints began to be heard about his want of efficiency. Guillaume de Lamoignon, who was honorary tutor to the young duke, wrote to say that he had been advised concerning three poachers who had made attempts to snare game in the plain of Château-Thierry, and he desired steps to be taken to remedy this breach of the law.

In August 1666 Colbert wrote from Fontainebleau, perhaps at the instigation of Louis XIV. or the Duc de Bouillon, to draw attention to the fact that an excessive amount of firewood had been used by the foresters and other officers, as well as to point out certain other depredations, and to state that if this abuse of privileges proved to be well-founded, reimbursement was to be claimed from those who were accused of dishonesty.

There was something to be said on the side of the unfortunate officials, and La Fontaine put their case plainly in a letter to M. Bafoy, intendant to the Duc de Bouillon, written from Rheims on September 1st, 1666. “It is quite two years,” he stated, “since we received any payments. . . . I beg of you, on my own

account and in the name of all the officials, to remember that there is not one of us who can thus afford to await the possession of his revenue without extreme inconvenience. I do not believe that his Highness wishes . . . that we should be more unfortunate than all his other subjects."

This appeal had but little result at the time. The sum granted in the first instance, amounting to about 26,667 livres, was reduced by a third on account of abuses and depredations which had to be refunded. Even then the sum which remained due, namely, 17,685 livres with an additional 2,460 for interest, was not paid until the close of 1668, his receipt for it being dated December 4th of that year.

On April 29th, 1670, La Fontaine gave a further receipt for 11,800 livres which had been owing to him by the Duc de Bouillon for the sale of wood, etc., and on January 31st, 1671, he signed a document concerning a sum of about 3,000 livres, which finally settled all his claims. This date may be regarded as finally concluding his duties as a commissioner of forests and waters. At last he was free. He breathed a sigh of deep content, and he wrote to Racine some years later, "My affairs keep me quite as busy as it is worth my while to be with them—that is to say, not at all." It was his boast that he did not care to speak of or to hear business spoken of.

From that time he was able to devote himself to the work that was nearest his heart—poetry.

CHAPTER VII

THE "CONTES"

LA FONTAINE, wrote La Harpe, declared that God when he created Adam, the nomenclator, said to his creature, "Te voilà : nomme !" As well say, added the sardonic critic, that God created La Fontaine, the tale-teller, saying to him, "Te voilà : conte !"

It would seem indeed that in giving to the world his libertine stories the poet obeyed an irresistible impulse. His object was to tell tales and to continue telling tales, joyous, vivacious, full of poetry and passion, to amuse and to charm the particular audience who wanted to hear something with spice and flavour in it. There is no excuse for his light mood, no object in attempting to exonerate him for what he did, none in discussing the "Contes" as though they were less reprehensible than they are. They are frankly licentious, and to-day they are not very amusing. It is not necessary to read them, but because they represent a phase of his character it is necessary in his biography to write of them.

For the most part they were not original in their

conception, being drawn from a number of sources such as Boccaccio, Ariosto, Petronius, Machiavelli, and many others. But La Fontaine possessed the art of adapting, of adding, blending, and embellishing to such a degree that he appropriated the stories, and if the original composer were not actually forgotten, he was at least far surpassed in brilliancy by his plagiarist.

Perhaps this very power to dress up the old classical tales in new and fascinating garb proved a danger in itself. Had La Fontaine invented his own plots and incidents his admirers might have been shocked because his muse ran persistently in one groove; but he could always point to his great models and say that a masterpiece had served him as a precedent, and thus silence criticism.

The practice of telling stories of this kind was as old as the hills. They were recited before a select company behind closed doors many and many a time before they were written down or became crystallised in print. They were akin to the romances and ballads recited by troubadours and jongleurs to the nobility in their castles in the Dark Ages, where for half the year the occupants were confined by the rigours of the climate. Tales of love, of mysticism, of religion, or war were sung generation after generation, and when war was barbarous the stories grew barbarous, and when life was licentious this trait was faithfully copied in words.

In Italy and in France from time to time the wave of libertinage swelled high. Almost every century felt its influence and brought forth literature which reflected the prevailing ideas. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are responsible for a number of Italian works of the kind, and François I. borrowed many things from across the border. Henri de Navarre was later the best warrior, the most lusty lover, France had ever known. The coarse and hardy manners of his age were combated by Mme de Rambouillet in her *salon bleu*, where the *précieuse* language was the very opposite of that which was spoken at the house of Mme de Bouillon. There the manners reflected those of an earlier date. People found pleasure then as they do to-day in being daring and extreme and in doing bold things deprecated by the authorities. But the astuteness of the authorities varied. Sometimes they were strict, sometimes they were lax, and in those days they modelled their virtue on that of the King and the Court, and paid little attention to public opinion, which had no weight, and indeed was barely permitted expression.

When La Fontaine began to write "Contes," Louis XIV. and his nobles tolerated much at which in after-years, when piety came into fashion, they frowned. The royal will was paramount, the royal taste pre-eminent. It was voluptuous, but at the same time *spirituel*. It did not amuse the King and his people to hear a spade called a spade. They desired that

ugly things should sound clever, if not pretty ; that indecency should have a gilding of fine words and be veiled behind poetry of exquisite form. The suggestive thought must not shock or repel. There must be no blush raised on the fair cheek of the most refined woman. And women like Mme de Sévigné, who was virtue itself, had no objection to the conveyance of gross ideas in delicate language. They encouraged the author to exert himself in this direction, “à conter d’une manière honnête,” the broad reality, the sensual incident which, had it been badly told, would have been merely disgusting and not in the least brilliant.

The demand for this sort of literature existing in some of the salons, no one could have supplied the need to better advantage than La Fontaine. He could be so gay, so careless, and all innocent of harm. He was non-moral and very dexterous with the pen.

“Qui pense finement et s’exprime avec grâce
Fait tout passer, car tout passe :
Je l’ai cent fois éprouvé ;
Quand le mot est bien trouvé,”¹

he wrote in “Le Tableau.” That was the secret : to use the right word, never to offend in sound, and

¹ “Who nicely thinks and speaks with graceful ease
Can current make just whatsoe’er he please,
For all will pass, as I have often known :
The word well chosen pardon soon is shown.”



MME DE SÉVIGNÉ
From the painting by Rioul

yet to keep the meaning clear and unmistakable. He prided himself on his delicacy and lucidity.

"Tout y sera voilé, mais de gaze, et si bien
Que je crois qu'on n'en perdra rien."¹

In the face of these lines it would be impossible to misunderstand the author's intention, or to white-wash him and his tales. He enjoyed writing them. He was proud of having written them. He revelled in the popularity they brought him, and still more in the good material things that came in the train of that popularity—the dinners, the comfortable homes, and the fine clothes. That was when Louis XIV. was not yet wearied of pleasure and his officials were lenient. But ten years passed and a change had come over the scene. The first wave of respectability, of puritanical thought, was sweeping the Court clean, and Mme de Maintenon was handling one of the brooms. The excitement of composing the "Contes" and the furore of their reception among a certain set were dying down, as notoriety gained by such means is certain to die down, and La Fontaine found that in high places he was regarded with suspicion, and that the work which had won him applause in private society was about to stand in

¹ "A veil shall over every charm be cast,
Of gauze indeed, and this from first to last
So nicely done that, howsoever tossed,
To none, I trust, will anything be lost."

"The Picture."

the light of his advancement in the public world of letters.

Then and then only he saw fit to retract. He began to wonder whether the game had been worth playing, whether the cost had not been too great, and he promised to mend his ways. He was still only half repentant, and followed this course more from expediency than morality, until through sheer physical suffering and the influence of pious friends he was made to see the error of his ways, and underwent the punishment of mental torture which conscience inflicts—a punishment that many must have thought he richly deserved.

Something was surely wanting in La Fontaine's character. To be really great he should either not have written the "Contes," or he should have had the courage not to attempt to excuse them, and never to disown them.

His excuses came so quickly. He had thrown out a tentative work to gauge the public taste. After the first little volume¹ had made its appearance, he wrote an extended preface for the reprint of these, with the addition of eight others, and one or two short poems. In his preface he explained that he had determined not to publish the "Contes" till he had completed those of Boccaccio, which pleased his taste the best, but his friends had dissuaded him from this plan, saying that the curiosity of the public was

¹ It contained "Joconde" and "Le Cocu Battu et Content."

aroused, and should be gratified before it cooled or turned to some other object. Therefore he decided not to miss his opportunity, for he realised that only works of masterly beauty and underlying truth were transmitted through all ages with universal applause and approbation, and that they required no better passport to the hearts of humanity than the real inherent merit possessed by them.

"As my writings," he remarked, "are very distant from such a degree of perfection, I am obliged in prudence to keep them locked in my desk until the favourable moment comes for making them public."

And here followed an apology, stating that the laws of art in this matter obliged him to ignore the laws of modesty.

"It may be said that an air of levity and licentiousness is diffused through the book ; as it may be likewise censured for trespassing on the respect due to the fair sex ; and these two objections seem to have the greatest weight. As to the first I must take the liberty to declare that this turn of writing is essential to the tale ; and it is an indispensable law, according to Horace, or rather it is according to reason and common sense, to make the thoughts and style conform to the subject. I will not suppose that I should not be permitted to write on such topics as well as many other authors who have exercised their abilities with great success. Those who object cannot condemn me with-

out extending their censure to Ariosto himself and the ancients before him. Perhaps I shall be told that it would have been better if I had suppressed certain details, or at least have toned them down and disguised them. Nothing could be easier than such a subterfuge, but the precaution would have weakened the story and deprived it of some of its charm."

When delicacy was carried to the extreme he regarded it as only derogatory to art. Many others have held this view since his time. "The person," he continued, "who would soften Boccaccio to the modesty of Virgil would do nothing worthy of his pen and would sin against the laws of propriety by his endeavour to preserve them."

With regard to the second objection raised against the "Contes," his defence was not particularly conclusive. He felt he might be thought guilty of wanting in respect to women. He pleaded that his work was sportive and could have no disagreeable effects. "There is no reason to be apprehensive," he concluded, "that the tales will cause marriages to be less frequent in the future, and that husbands will be more suspicious and on their guard than they were before. It may perhaps be further objected that these stories have no foundation in truth, or that their foundation might easily be destroyed; in short, that they are crowded with absurdities, and have no basis of probability. My reply is that I can produce my authorities, and that it is neither truth nor the appear-

ance of truth but the manner of telling the story which constitutes its charm and beauty."

There was one side to the question which it is not easy to grasp to-day. La Fontaine believed that gaiety and sparkle worked far less evil upon the emotions than sentimentality, or, as he expressed it, made less impression upon souls than the gentle melancholy of novels more chaste and restrained. Sighs and soft imaginings in those days were thought to cover a multitude of evil longings, where bold passion was natural and to be commended. Frankness need not necessarily imply depravity. Louis Racine expressed this idea when he wrote of the stories: "In these licentious writings one does not perceive that spirit of libertinism or the corrupt heart which is noticeable in the authors of so many writings of this kind. One sees a man who allowed himself to be drawn by an unfortunate talent, of which he did not foresee the fatal results. He pushed his astonishing simplicity to the extent of believing that such writings had nothing dangerous about them."

La Fontaine loved the "Contes," and believed in them as works of literary art. But he protested too much.

Maucroix, who was entitled to know what the author felt, and to say what he knew, wrote: "I can . . . assure you that generally speaking he regarded the Fables as his best work. But he admitted, nevertheless, that he sometimes showed more wit in

the verses which made him shed tears at the end of his days."¹

Among the poet's most ardent contemporary supporters was Boileau, on the occasion of the dispute which occurred between rival adapters of Ariosto's "Joconde." The story deals with the eternal subject of the artifices, ruses, and infidelity of women. It is, in short, a biting satire on feminine weakness. Reference occurs to the same topic in the prologue of the "Thousand and One Nights," in the more classical versions of "Bluebeard," and other legends. When La Fontaine's version appeared, M. Bouillon, secretary to Gaston d'Orléans, had already adapted "Joconde," and published his poem in 1663. Brossette said that it was because La Fontaine thought the story very badly constructed that he wanted to improve on it.

As happened in the case of all the literary squabbles

¹ Perrault took a severe view. "His tales, most of which are little novels worked up in verse," he declared, "are equally beautiful, and too high a value could not be set upon them did not a strain of immodesty run through most of them. The images of love are therein represented in such lively colours that few books are of more dangerous consequence to youth; and yet no man ever wrote more chastely on virtuous subjects. It is well known that he repented in the latter part of his life, very sincerely, the prejudice he had done to society. He was a member of the French Academy, and when he desired to be admitted into that body he wrote a letter to a prelate belonging to it, expressing his sorrow for having written with so vicious a pen, and taking a sincere resolution not to compose any more pieces of that kind." Bussy-Rabutin, who was the recipient of Mme de Sévigné's eulogies, largely agreed with his fair cousin and correspondent in her opinion of the poet. "As for M. de la Fontaine," he wrote to Furetière, "he is the most agreeable teller of tales we ever had in France."

of the day, every one took sides. It was a repetition of the quarrel between Benserade and Voiture which occurred on account of their respective sonnets, "Job" and "Uranie," in the *salon bleu* some years earlier. The only man of letters who remained severely neutral was Molière, who was friendly to both parties.

Boileau became a wild partisan of La Fontaine, writing in favour of him in no ambiguous terms. The poet, he said, "has certainly taken his subject from Ariosto, but at the same time he has rendered himself complete master of it. It is not a copy which he has drawn, feature by feature, after the original; it is an original which he has written on the idea furnished by Ariosto . . . and I maintain that not only is M. de la Fontaine's tale infinitely better than that of M. Bouillon, but that it is even more agreeably told than that of Ariosto." He then proceeded to discuss both versions in detail, and to pull that of M. Bouillon severely to pieces, saying of it, "As you see, there is not a single line in which there is not something to take exception to, and which Quintilian would not have sent back to be beaten out again upon the literary anvil."¹

¹ Voltaire took the opposite view. "In the 'Contes' he imitated from Ariosto," he wrote, "he does not exhibit his elegance and purity, he is not nearly so great a painter, and this Boileau did not perceive in his Dissertation on 'Joconde,' because Despréaux hardly knew Italian. But in the 'Contes' derived from Boccaccio La Fontaine is superior, for he has far more wit, grace, and finesse. Boccaccio has no other merit than artlessness, clearness, and exactitude of language. He helped to form his mother-tongue, and La Fontaine often corrupted his."

Mme de Sévigné, among the poet's contemporaries, saw many beauties in the "Contes," but she had also a critical eye for them. "There are passages which are fine," she wrote, "even very fine, and others which are tiresome. No one is ever satisfied with having done well, and in trying to do better does badly." The dignified Mme de Lafayette did not scruple to show her interest in these broad tales, but Mme de Grignan did not share her mother's tastes, and Mme de Sévigné expostulated with her. "Do not cast aside the books of La Fontaine in so summary a fashion. There are fables which will delight you and tales which will charm you ; the end of 'Les Oies de Frère Philippe,' 'Les Rémois,' 'Le Petit Chien,' all these are excellent. Only those which are not in this style fall flat. I should like to write a fable which would make him understand how stupid it is to force his wit and discard his true style, and that the folly of wishing to sing on all the notes makes but poor harmony. He ought not to neglect for anything else the talent he has for telling tales."

This letter was written in the spring of 1671, the year that the third part of the "Contes" first saw the light in print. The second part, issued in 1666, included "Richard Minutolo," taken from "The Decameron," a subject on which Houdart de Lamotte wrote a comedy in 1705 ; "Le Mari Confesseur," derived from "Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles," which, however, had an older source ; "Conte tiré d'Athénée,"

the "Juge de Mesle," from a contemporary anecdote, and several others. But the third collection was more ambitious and more successful. In it his mastery of this particular class of writing was perfected, his lines are metrical and powerful, his muse free. "Les Oies de Frère Philippe," specially praised by Mme de Sévigné, is the well-known story of a youth who was brought up by his hermit-father in complete ignorance of the existence of women. At the age of twenty he accompanies his father to a city, and encounters a group of young damsels :

"Ravi comme en extase à cet objet charmant,
'Qu'est-ce là, dit-il à son père,
Qui porte un si gentil habit?
Comment l'appelle-t-on?' Ce discours ne plut guère
Au bon vieillard qui répondit :
'C'est un oiseau qui s'appelle oie.'
'O l'agréable oiseau!' dit le fils plein de joie.
'Oie, hélas! chante un peu, que j'entende ta voix!
Peut-on point un peu te connoître?
Mon père, je vous prie et mille et mille fois,
Menons-en une en notre bois,
J'aurai soin de la faire paître.'"¹

"Les Rémois," another tale admired by Mme de Sévigné, is founded on an Indian basis, and begins

¹ "He cried, enraptured by this enchanting sight, 'What is that, father, so beautifully garbed? What do you call it?' Displeased by these questions, the old man replies, 'Tis a bird called a goose.' 'O lovely bird!' cries the lad in a transport of joy. 'Prithee, sing a little; let's listen to your music. Could not I get to know you better Father, I entreat you, if you love me, let us take back one of them into the forest. I will feed it myself.'"

with the lines frequently quoted as proof of the poet's affection for the city where he and Maucroix passed many rollicking days in their youth :

“Il n'est cité que je préfère à Rheims,
C'est l'ornement et l'honneur de la France ;
Car sans compter l'ampoule¹ et les bons vins,
Charmants objets y sont en abondance.”²

Perhaps the best known of this collection is “La Coupe enchantée,” taken from “Ariosto.” A pirated edition of the “Contes et Nouvelles en vers de M. de la Fontaine” was published at Leyden in 1669, and contained a fragment of this poem with an explanation from the editor.

“I would not have published this novel, imperfect as it is, if I had not good authority for believing that the illustrious author had no intention of completing it. But, whatever condition it may be in, you should be obliged to me for including it, for the prologue is regarded by the most enlightened as a masterpiece.”

La Fontaine retorted to this statement by printing the fragment in the Paris edition of 1669, with a footnote saying : “Had there been no Dutch edition I should have waited until this work was finished

¹ The ampoule is the vial containing the oil used at the consecration of the Kings of France.

² “No city I to Rheims would e'er prefer,
Of France the pride and honour, I aver ;
The holy ampoule and delicious wine,
Which every one regards as most divine,
We'll set apart, and other objects take :
The beauties round a Paradise might make !”

before giving it to the public, the fragments which were written being of so small importance that I did not believe any one would take the trouble to print them. In this matter, as in others, the Dutch edition does me more honour than I deserve.¹ I could only have wished that those who went to all this trouble had not added that they had good grounds for saying that I should leave this story without a conclusion. I cannot remember having ever said such a thing, which is quite contrary to my intention, because the first thing I mean to work at is the 'Coupe enchantée.' "

The completed story of "The Magic Cup" appeared, as stated, in the third part of the "Contes," published in 1671.

The prologue gives counsel to the jealous husband :

"Learn then to live, in Hymen's fetters,
Like beaux, and lords, and men of letters ;
Be unsuspicious, calm, and cool.
Nor imitate that curious fool
Who snatch'd up the enchanted cup,
And vainly tried to take a sup ;
The tale affords you good advice,
And you shall hear it in a trice." ²

"Tales and Novels in Verse,"

Translated by MR. HUMPHRYS, 1762.

¹ The editor had included a eulogy of the author in his preface.

² "Vous croyez cependant que c'est un fort grand cas :

Tâchez donc d'en douter, et ne ressemblez pas

A celui là qui but dans la coupe enchantée,

Profitez du malheur d'autrui

Si cette histoire peut soulager votre ennui,

Je vous l'aurai bientôt contée."

"La Mandragore," taken from Machiavelli, was followed literally by La Fontaine. "Le Faucon," drawn from Boccaccio, was a novel so tender that it made even the most indifferent weep. "Le Petit Chien" was borrowed from Ariosto's "Orlando Furioso," and concerns the bewitched dog Favori, who lets drop pearls, rubies, diamonds, and other precious stones. This idea, which appealed to the poetic mind of Mme de Sévigné, is akin to that of many similar traditions, such as the goose that lays the golden eggs and the two daughters, one of whom is beautiful, good, and honest, with roses and gems falling from her lips when she speaks, while the naughty sister drops vipers and toads whenever she opens her mouth.

The lines quoted indicate the drift of the story of the enchanted lover visiting the fair one whose heart he desires to win :

"Même, pour m'approcher de cette inexorable,
Et vous la rendre favorable,
En petit chien vous m'allez voir
Faisant mille tours sur l'herbette ;
Et vous, en pèlerin jouant de la musette,
Me pourrez à ce son mener chez la beauté
Qui tient votre cœur enchanté." ¹

¹ "The better to approach the cruel belle,
And to your suit her prompt consent compel,
Myself transformed you'll presently perceive,
And, as a little dog, I'll much achieve.
And round and round I'll gambol o'er the lawn,
In every way attempt to please and fawn,
While you, a pilgrim, shall the bagpipes play ;
Come, take me to the sweet without delay."

So far success with his "Contes" had come to La Fontaine by leaps and bounds. He was now to experience a sudden check. He was refused privilege for his fourth collection of tales; and when they appeared without it in 1674, they were interdicted by an order of the police, signed by de la Reynie, and dated April 5th, 1675. The *procureur du Roi* having been advised that a little book, printed without privilege or permission, under the title of "Nouveaux Contes de M. de la Fontaine," was found to contain indiscreet and indecorous terms, and that the perusal of it could have no other effect than that of corrupting good manners and inspiring libertinage, regarded it as highly important to prevent the sale of such book. It was therefore expressly forbidden to all booksellers, printers, and others concerned, to obtain, sell, or in any manner circulate the said book, under threat of severe penalty.

The book had been clandestinely printed by one Gaspard Migeon at Mons in 1674. The interdict in no way interfered with the production, for reprints appeared in 1675 and 1676. Whether these stories were really more frankly licentious than the earlier ones or whether the author had become a less admirable *enveloppeur*, as Bussy-Rabutin had called him, is extremely doubtful. The censorship, now strict, now lax, was in the former vein; the King's eye was on the daring poet.

The suspected volume contained amongst others

"Comment l'esprit vient aux Filles," "l'Abbesse," a story derived from "Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles," "la Jument de compère Pierre," the famous "Diable en Enfer," the "Tableau," in which the author vaunts his powers of double-entendre, and "La Chose Impossible," a subject familiar in various forms, but of which the exact origin can only be surmised. Congreve wrote a version of this for Steele¹ with the following dedication:

"To thee, dear Dick, this tale I send,
Both as a critic and a friend;
I tell it with some variation
(Not altogether a translation)
From La Fontaine; an author, Dick,
Whose muse would touch thee to the quick.

The subject is of that same kind
To which thy heart seems most inclined;
How verse may alter it, God knows;
Thou lov'st it well, I'm sure, in prose."

An edition of the "Contes" containing the three first parts and some of the fourth appeared at Lyons in 1679.

A new issue was produced at Amsterdam in 1685 by Desbordes, who published another volume in 1691 containing some new tales; and when La Fontaine died, in 1695, all the tales had been printed. But those which followed the fourth work were never grouped in a separate collection by their author. Circumstances, notably connected with his admission to the Academy,

¹ "Tales and Novels in Verse," by Several Hands, 1762.

had made circumspection necessary. The love of tale-telling having grown upon him, however, he found it difficult to break himself of the habit in spite of the promise made in his second preface, in which he said : "These are the last works of this style that will come from the pen of the author, and consequently this is the last opportunity he has of vindicating the boldness and privilege which he has assumed."

Further excuses were woven by him into the prologue of "La Fleuve Scamandre."

"Me voilà prêt à conter de plus belle ;
Amour le veut et rit de mon serment :
Hommes et dieux, tout est sous sa tutelle,
Tout obéit, tout cède à cet enfant.
J'ai désormais besoin, en le chantant,
De traits moins fort et déguisant la chose ;
Car, après tout, je ne veux être cause
D'aucun abus ; que plutôt mes écrits
Manquent de sel, et ne soient d'aucun prix!"¹

This poem, taken from *Æschines*, is reminiscent of the story of the god-like river of the Troad, the waters of which rendered surpassingly fair the hair of women and the fleece of sheep immersed in them. Young girls on the eve of marriage came to bathe in the

¹ "I am ready to resume the tales I had laid aside. Cupid commands me, laughing at my oath. Men and gods, and nature herself, all are subject to his rule. All things obey, all things yield to the cherub. But in celebrating his power in song, henceforward I shall employ less forcible terms and shall veil my tales under the chastest disguise. For after all, I do not wish to be the cause of the least scandal. Nay! rather may my writings be wanting in savour and be regarded as of little worth."

waves, offering their virginity to the river-god, whose swelling waters, raising them high in their embrace, carried them into grottos on the banks and initiated them into the mysteries of love.

In La Fontaine's story, Cimon, the hero, seeing an innocent maiden about to bathe in the River Scamander, impersonates the river-god :

"Je suis, dit-il, le dieu qui commande à cette onde ;
Soyez-en la déesse, et réglez avec moi :
Peu de fleuves pourroient dans leur grotte profonde
Partager avec vous un aussi digne emploi.
Mon cristal est très pur ; mon cœur l'est davantage ;
Je couvrirai pour vous de fleurs tout ce rivage ;
Trop heureux si vos pas le daignent honorer,
Et qu'au fond de mes eaux vous daigniez vous mirer !
Je rendrai toutes vos compagnes
Nymphes aussi, soit aux montagnes,
Soit aux eaux, soit aux bois ; car j'étends mon pouvoir
Sur tout ce que votre œil à la ronde peut voir."¹

In "Les Aveux Indiscrets," La Fontaine makes evident some of his later views on marriage :

"Le nœud d'hymen doit être respecté
Veut de la foi, veut de l'honnêteté,

¹ "I am, says he, the deity who presides over this flood,
Be thou its goddess and share with me my reign :
Few river-gods could in their deepest grot
Bestow so great a dignity on thee.
My stream is pure, my heart is purer still,
For thee I'll strew my banks with scented flowers.
Thrice happy if thou wilt but deign to step thereon
And see thy beauty mirrored in my deeps.
All thy companions shall be turned to nymphs
Of mountains, streams, or woods ; my rule extends
O'er all thine eye can see."

Si par malheur quelque atteinte un peu forte
 Le fait clocher d'un ou d'autre côté,
 Comportez-vous de manière et de sorte.
 Que ce secret ne soit point éventé :
 Gardez de faire aux égards banqueroute ;
 Mentir alors est digne de pardon.
 Je donne ici de beaux conseils, sans doute :
 Les ai-je pris pour moi-même ? Hélas ! non."¹

Besides the well-known "Aveux Indiscrets," "La Fleuve Scamandre," and "Belphégor," "La Clochette" belonged to this later period, and, since the original cannot be traced, appears to be La Fontaine's own invention. In the prologue he expresses regret for his broken promise :

"How weak is man ! How changeable his mind !
 His promises are void, too oft we find.
 I vowed (I hope in tolerable verse)
 Again no evil story to rehearse,
 And made this promise—when ? Two days ago !
 I'm quite confounded ; better I should know.
 A rhymist speaks, then, who himself can boast
 Quite steady for—a minute at the most."

The story of the Ephesian matron, "La Matrone

¹ "The marriage vow one ever should maintain ;
 Its faith the pair should always keep in view,
 The path of honour steadily pursue.
 If some mishap, howe'er, should chance to glide,
 And make you limp on one or t'other side,
 Endeavour of the fault to make the best,
 And keep the secret close within your breast.
 Your own consideration never lose ;
 Untruth 'tis pardonable then to use.
 No doubt my pages fine advice supply.
 Is't what I've followed ? No, you may reply."

d'Ephèse," was taken from the "Satyricon" of Petronius. It was first published in 1682, after the poem of "Quinquina," and also as Fable XXVI. of the "Fables choisies" (1694). This subject was made use of over and over again, Saint-Evremond, among others, having translated it. La Fontaine, aware that it was familiar to every one, began with an apology :

"S'il est un conte usé, commun, et rebattu,
C'est celui qu'en ces vers j'accommode à ma guise
Et pourquoi donc le choisis-tu ?
Qui t'engage à cette enterprise ?
N'a-t-elle point déjà produit assez d'écrits ?
 Quelle grâce aura ta Matrone
 Au prix de celle de Pétrone ?
Comment la rendras-tu nouvelle à nos esprits ?
Sans répondre aux censeurs, car c'est chose infinie,
Voyons si dans mes vers je l'aurai rajeunie."¹

"Belphégor," the famous story in which the characteristics of his wife were said to be reproduced in Honesta, was derived from Machiavelli, and was dedicated to Mlle de Champmeslé, with whom La Fontaine was very friendly. She did as much as any one else to spread the fame of the "Contes." "Belphégor" opened with these graceful lines :

¹ "If there's a tale more common than the rest,
The one I wish to give is such confessed.
'Why choose it, then?' you ask; 'at whose desire?
Hast not enough by this time tuned thy lyre ?
What favour can thy Matron now expect,
Since novelty thou clearly dost neglect ?
Besides, thou'lt surely raise the critics' rage.'
See if it looks more modern in my page?"

" De votre nom j'orne le frontispice
 Des derniers vers que ma Muse a polis.
 Puisse le tout, ô charmante Philis,
 Aller si loin que notre los franchisse
 La nuit des temps ! nous la saurons dompter,
 Moi par écrire, et vous par réciter
 Nos noms unis perceront l'ombre noire ;
 Vous régnerez longtemps dans la mémoire
 Après avoir régné jusques ici
 Dans les esprits, dans les cœurs même aussi.
 Que ne connoit l'inimitable actrice
 Représentant ou Phèdre ou Bérénice,
 Chimène en pleurs, ou Camille en fureur ?
 Est-il quelqu'un que votre voix n'enchanter ? " ¹

Voltaire, in an *épître* to Mlle Clairon, wrote of this story :

" Que ce conteur heureux qui plaisamment chanta
 Le démon Belphégor et Madame Honesta,
 L'Esopé des Français, le maître de la fable
 Ait de la Champmeslé vanté la voix aimable."

Although he called their author the happy teller-of-tales, Voltaire in the main did not approve of the

¹ " Your name with grateful pleasure here I place,
 The last effusions of my muse to grace.
 O charming Phillis ! may the same extend
 Through time's dark night : our praise together blend ;
 To this we surely might pretend to aim :
 Your acting and my rhymes attention claim.
 Long, long in mem'ry's book your fame shall live,
 You, who true ecstasy so freely give ;
 O'er minds, o'er hearts, triumphantly you reign ;
 In Berenice, in Phædra, and Chimene,
 Your tears and plaintive accents all engage ;
 Beyond compare in proud Camilla's rage ;
 Your voice and manner auditors delight ;
 Who deep emotions can so well excite ? "

“Contes.” “There is not one,” he said, “which speaks to the heart except ‘Le Faucon,’ not one from which we can draw a useful moral, not one in which he shows real inventiveness; . . . besides, it is rarely that perfect poetry continues throughout the story.” Nevertheless he called La Fontaine the French *Æsop* and a master of fable. On the other hand, Boileau, who had gone out of his way to write a defence of one of the “Contes,” never wrote a line in his “*Art Poétique*” concerning the Fables.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FABLES

“**W**HAT La Fontaine is in the ‘Contes’ all the world knows,” wrote Saint-Beuve ; “ what he is in fable the world also knows and feels, but it is much less easy to explain it. Authors of intelligence have tried the same style and failed ; they have put in action, according to precept, animals, trees, men, hiding a sly meaning, a healthy moral, under their little dramas ; and then to their surprise they are judged inferior to their illustrious predecessor.”

It is upon the Fables that the poet’s reputation rests ; and it must be said, in justification of the taste of the gay ladies and gentlemen who frequented the more daring salons, that they appreciated the innocent verses with as much gusto as they had shown for those of a less harmless tendency. The Fables were so spontaneous, so full of unexpected surprises and quaint conceits. The idea of inanimate objects and animate objects other than man being shown to possess traits and passions akin to the human—an idea that had existed from the earliest ages—had in spite of its antiquity something novel, stimulating, and provocative

in it to people who were surfeited with heroic romance, love-songs, and historical epics.

To the jaded and over-excited senses, simplicity has a charm, if only by force of contrast. The basic principle of the fable is simplicity. The composition contains no rapid succession of events, no intricate puzzles of plot, no clash of interests, no tangle of threads to be unravelled, no bewildering number of characters ; there is a central idea, one incident, not more than two or three actors, and a moral ! The action is natural, but the agent is imaginary, and thus the delighted reader is left at the close gasping midway between the marvellous and the probable. That is the charm of allegory. The effect is produced without loss of time ; the sensation is almost instantaneous.

The useful information or the moral precept gives a point to the whole, as salt savours meat. Nothing is wanting to complete the sense of intellectual satisfaction, provided only the art of the fabulist be of the best. And La Fontaine's art in this class of literature was of the very best and has perhaps never been equalled, in spite of the great names, Æsop, Pilpay, Lokman, Babrius, and Phædrus (to say nothing of more modern writers), with which his has been linked.

As in the "Contes," he borrowed from the older models ; here, too, his success was not in the matter, but in the manner of telling. Consequently volumes have been filled with discussion on the origin of his sources. They were many. His tastes were catholic,

and he sipped stories from the classics as freely as the bee he made proverbial sipped honey from blossoms, now here, now there.

The secret of his method was to draw inspiration from outside without in the least fettering his own poetic muse. He gathered a thousand ideas, and by a slow process of mental digestion brought them forth again, having made them his own, in a style that was incomparable for its clarity, sonority, and flexibility. His language is supple and full of motion. He was an artist of words. His agile and changeful phrases are sometimes dreamy and voluptuous, sometimes melodious and full of plaint, sometimes fluent and jerky, sometimes low as the murmur of a rippling brook. Not that he was faultless. He was occasionally trivial, commonplace, and careless. But, said Voltaire, "it was well to distinguish between his careless and puerile phrases, of which there were a great number, and the admirable traits, of which there were a greater number still."

The same author bestowed upon him more definite praise. "In most of his fables," he wrote, "he is infinitely superior to those who wrote before and after him, whatever language they may have written in." Whilst he assimilated much from the poets he had studied—Ronsard and Marot amongst them—he prepared the way for his successors and left a legacy to André Chenier and Alfred de Musset. His was a strong link in the chain of France's poetry.

La Fontaine attributed to Fouquet the impelling power which started him along the path of fable-writing. "It was you," he wrote to the Superintendent, "who first made me a fable-teller, in bidding me compose the 'Songe de Vaux.' " In these verses he had conceived the idea of making animals play an intelligent part in the scheme of society. The salmon, the sturgeon, the swan, and the squirrel were all made use of in this fashion, their special characteristics being made to do duty in bringing about natural results. As Walpole remarked in the letter already quoted: "In La Fontaine everything is produced by disposition. . . . If one is a wolf, one devours. If one is a fox, one is cunning. If one is a monkey, one is a coxcomb."

A wonderful procession of animals stalks through the fables, almost every kind of zoological specimen being represented. There are rats¹ enough to require the services of many Pied Pipers of Hamelin, lions enough to stock the equatorial forests, wolves enough to make the Steppes of Russia seem crowded, bats and birds, gnats and frogs galore, and to each beast, feathered thing, or fish a place is given in the social scale which he fills with dignity and grace, or in which he acts with wisdom and judgment, or again in which he is made to look ridiculous and becomes the laughing-stock of those about him.

La Fontaine took the old stories, generally with their moral precepts attached, but modernised them to

¹ La Fontaine occasionally confused rats with mice.

the extent of reflecting in them the manners and foibles of his day. All the social orders were represented and classified. He avoided personalities, but types were his legitimate prey.

The lion stood for the ruler, or king, and being the most important appears more times than any other beast. He is always regal, aware of his own worth, condescending to all beneath him in station, even magnanimous to the small fry who flutter or scuttle round his greatness. But he never loses his dignity :

“Va-t'en, chétif insecte, excrément de la terre !”

he cries to the gnat who is audacious enough to trouble him by buzzing and stinging; but to the rat who pops up between his paws, all unconscious of danger, he is graciousness personified :

“Montra ce qu'il était, et lui donna la vie.”

But he does not bear with fools gladly, and the ass is the object of his contempt. When he calls a council of war, although he will not reject the blockhead, since it is well to make use of every resource, he gives him the safe part of trumpeter, so that he may scare the enemy. When he goes hunting the lion again commands the ass to bray :

“Assured that his tempestuous cry
The boldest beasts would terrify,
And cause them from their lairs to fly.”

But when the ass claims the reward for service, and

boasts of his assistance, the noble animal immediately puts him in his proper place :

“ ‘Yes,’ said the lion, ‘bravely bray’d
Had I not known yourself and race,
I should have been myself afraid!’ ”

When he is lying old and forsaken, it is the ass who offers him the last insult :

“A lion, mourning in his age the wane
Of might once dreaded through his wild domain,
Was mocked, at last, upon his throne,
By subjects of his own,
Strong through his weakness grown.
The horse his head saluted with a kick ;
The wolf snapp’d at his royal hide ;
The ox, too, gored him in the side.
The unhappy lion, sad and sick,
Could hardly growl, he was so weak.”

Then the ass approaches :

“Thy kick is double death,”

cries the humiliated and worn-out monarch.

Seen in the midst of his Court, powerful, resplendent, surrounded by courtiers and flatterers, the lion is at his best. He is ready to punish disobedience or disrespect, to reward diplomacy and servility. He makes it evident that to gain his favour tact is essential, and that the safest course is to address him in phrases

“ ‘Twixt blunt rebuke and fulsome praise.”

When he invites his courtiers into his den, where the scent is too strong for their comfort, he dismisses from

his presence the bear, who makes a gesture as though about to cover his nose with his paw, whilst the ape, who declares the odour is far finer than "the rose, the pink, the hawthorn bank," fares no better. But upon the fox, who craftily excuses himself, declaring a cold has deprived him of the sense of smell, he smiles, and is pleased to bestow his favours.

The fox always gets the better of every one else in the fables. He makes use of the goat to climb out of the well, and then leaves him to his fate. He is always taking advantage of the wolf, for he has more brains, if less strength. He has no difficulty in inventing stratagems which bring the plump turkeys into his larder. He is always diplomatic, he comes smiling out of every difficulty, he is quick and energetic; his personal appearance, heightened by his bright eyes and bushy tail, is in his favour. He has two qualities invaluable to the courtier, a certain dash and certain subtlety, and above all he is *bon viveur*.

"Grand croqueur de poulets, grands preneur de lapins."

His worst enemy is the dog, with whom his tricks are frequently wanting in success. When out walking with the cat, and boastful of his own superior resources, he finds himself at a disadvantage the moment an attack is threatened by a pack of hounds. The cat quickly climbs a lofty tree.

"The fox his hundred ruses tried,
And yet no safety found:

A hundred times he falsified
The nose of every hound.
Was here, and there, and everywhere,
Above, and underground."

In the end they are too clever for him, and he meets his death, poor Reynard !

In La Fontaine the same animals appear again and again. Their stories form a homogeneous whole, which their author termed "a drama in a hundred acts."

Complete, the "drama" is to be found in twelve books, containing some two hundred and forty fables. The first six books were collected and published in a quarto volume in 1668, for which volume the author obtained privilege on June 6th, 1667. The title was "Fables Choies mises en vers. Par M. de la Fontaine." A corrected reprint appeared the same year in two 12mo volumes, and another reprint in 1669. In 1671 a new collection was issued, containing eight new fables, fragments of the "Songe de Vaux," a reprint of "Adonis," and some short poems. This volume was dedicated to the Duc de Guise under the title of "Fables Nouvelles et autre Poësies." The first complete edition of the Fables, in four volumes, was issued in 1678-9, with an additional fifth volume in 1694, containing twenty-seven new fables and two or three other poems.

In 1661 a dauphin was born to Louis XIV. and Marie Thérèse. Seven years later La Fontaine paid the King the honour of dedicating the first six books of

his fables to this little son. His arms were blazoned on the title-page, and a letter accompanied the work :

“You are at an age when amusement and games are permitted to princes,” wrote the author, “but at the same time you ought to give some of your thoughts to serious reflection. All this is to be found in the fables which we owe to Æsop. I confess that in appearance they are puerile, but the puerilities serve to conceal important truths.”

The same thought is carried out in verse :

“Je chante les héros dont Ésope est le père,
Troupe de qui l'histoire, encor que mensongère,
Contient des vérités qui servent de leçons,
Tout parle en mon ouvrage, et même les poissons :
Ce qu'ils disent s'adresse à tous tant que nous sommes ;
Je me sers d'animaux pour instruire les hommes.
Illustre rejeton d'un prince aimé des cieux,
Sur qui le monde entier a maintenant les yeux,
Et qui faisant fléchir les plus superbes têtes,
Comptera désormais ses jours par ses conquêtes,
Quelque autre te dira d'une plus forte voix
Les faits de tes aïeux et les vertus des rois.”¹

¹ “I sing the heroes of old Æsop's line,
Whose tale, though false when strictly we define,
Containeth truths it were not ill to teach.
With me all natures use the gift of speech ;
Yea, in my work the very fishes preach,
And to our human selves their sermons suit.
'Tis thus, to come at man, I use the brute.
Son of a prince, the favourite of the skies,
On whom the world entire hath fix'd its eyes,
Who hence shall count his conquests by his days,
And gather from the proudest lips his praise,
A louder voice than mine must tell in song
What virtues to thy kingly line belong.”

The first fable concerns the well-known story of the grasshopper and the ant, "*La Cigale et la Fourmi*," taken from *Æsop*. Rousseau, in "*Emile*," objected to the little poem, saying that it would give children a lesson in inhumanity.

"You believe you are making an example of the grasshopper, but they will choose the ant . . . they will take the more pleasant part, which is a very natural thing."

One answer to that argument was given by Saint-Marc Girardin in "*La Fontaine et les Fabulistes*." When asked whether it was better to like the ant or the grasshopper, he replied: "One can only prefer the things or people that one loves. As for me, I love neither grasshopper nor ant, neither avarice nor prodigality, neither the miserly people who lend nor the spendthrifts who borrow. If the ant were young, I reproach her for having neither the faults nor the qualities of her youth. She forgot that she was twenty . . . on the other hand, the grasshopper had forgotten she would one day be fifty."

The second fable, "*Le Corbeau et le Renard*," has appeared in a number of different versions. Lessing improved the moral, Richer gave the crow her revenge. Catherine of Russia had it arranged as a play. Rousseau makes a number of objections to it, and Voltaire, although he thought the line "*Vous êtes le phénix des hôtes de ces bois*" excellent, disliked the whole because it was bad poetry, and not because it was bad morals.

The third fable is to be found in Æsop, Babrius, Horace, Phædrus, and elsewhere. It tells the familiar story of the frog who wished to be as big as the ox. If the poet required contemporary models for his picture, he might have easily found suitable ones at Court. It was perfectly true that there

“Tout petit prince a des ambassadeurs,
Tout marquis veut avoir des pages.”

Or, to express the idea in general terms :

“And, really, there is no telling,
How much great men set little ones a-swelling.”

“Le Loup et le Chien,” which appears as No. V. of Book I., was used by Æsop, Babrius, Phædrus, Marie de France, and Corrozet. Rousseau declared it taught a harmful independence to children. He had seen a little girl crying bitterly over this tale. When asked what grieved her, she said that her fetters were painful, she too felt “a galled spot” on the neck. She cried because she longed for the freedom of the wolf.

The wolf has usually been regarded as an unfortunate animal. “He is the enemy of all society,” wrote Buffon ; “he does not even find companions among his own species. When they are seen in numbers, these quadrupeds do not form a peaceful group, but a body of warriors, who unite with much noise and fearful howling, with the intention of attacking some animal larger than themselves. . . . As soon as their

warlike expedition is over, they separate and return to their silence and solitude."

Nor does La Fontaine picture this gaunt and hungry beast of prey in more attractive colours. He shows him as a daring, strong, insolent, and cruel being, ready for crime or murder. In Fable X., "Le Loup et l'Agneau," the would-be murderer refuses to listen to the plea of his victim: "How could I such a thing have done; a lamb that has not seen a year?" Without giving the innocent lamb a chance of escape or the opportunity of defending itself,

"He made his vengeance good,
Bore off the lambkin to the wood,
And there, without a jury,
Judged, slew, and ate her in his fury."

The fable that follows (No. XI.) is very different in style. The idea of it was original, and the subject greatly admired. The author entitled it "L'Homme et son Image," and dedicated it to his friend and patron the Duc de la Rochefoucauld. It contained a reference to the famous "Maxims," two editions of which had appeared successively in 1665 and 1666. In fact it was less a fable than a compliment paid to the author on his work. It dealt with the somewhat fantastic idea of a man who buries himself in the country to escape the sight of his own face reflected in a glass:

"Mirrors in parlours, inns, and shops,
Mirrors the pocket furniture of fops,



BOILEAU

Mirrors on every lady's zone,
From which his face reflected shone."

But even in the forest glen to which he flies bright
streams give as clear a reflection of his face as the more
artificial mirror has done. He cannot escape his fate.

"The mirror's follies are of others,
In which as all are genuine brothers,
Each soul may see to life depicted
Itself with just such faults afflicted;
And by that charming placid brook,
Needless to say, I mean your Maxim book."¹

Fable XVI., "La Mort et le Bûcheron," is the one which Boileau endeavoured to emulate, finding it not to his taste. La Fontaine has attempted to show the love of life in man. His wood-cutter is typical of labouring humanity. Overburdened by cares, man throws down the bundle of fagots with which he is trudging homeward and calls upon Death to set him free. When the grim monarch appears, he dares not voice his desire, but requests him to help in placing the burden of wood again upon his back. Cuvelier² thought that Boileau had developed this idea to better advantage. He gave a clearer picture of the miseries of existence endured by the wood-cutter, and drew a clearer distinction between life, suffering, and death.

¹ "Notre âme, c'est cet homme amoureux de lui-même;
Tant de miroirs, ce sont les sottises d'autrui,
Miroirs, de nos défauts les peintres légitimes;
Et quant au canal, c'est celui
Que chacun sait, le livre des Maximes."

² "La Fontaine et Boileau sur le Terrain de la Fable."

The appeal to Death in the second part was more solemn, for Death, instead of appearing forthwith, has to be called upon over and over again before he responds to the summons. But Saint-Marc Girardin held exactly the opposite opinion. He preferred the work of La Fontaine, and refused to compare the poems because the distance between them seemed to him too great to be spanned.

In the early editions this fable was coupled with another on similar lines, called "*La Mort et le Malheureux*," which also illustrates the natural shrinking of man from death. This idea seems to have been fixed firmly in the mind of the poet, for it appears again in the longer fable, "*La Mort et le Mourant*" (Book VIII., No. I.), drawn from Abstemius. Chamfort thought the prologue "moving, as it ought to be, on a subject which is of interest to every one." Geruzez considered that the nobility of the style, the gravity of the sentiment, and the importance of the closing moral lesson made of it a masterpiece.

Walckenaer declared it the best of all the fables, according to his choice. "In no other," he wrote, "does La Fontaine appear to have reached greater heights by sheer force and dignity of expression; in no other has he known how to unite more happily and more naturally the artlessness of dialogue and the art of comedy with the most imperious wisdom and the most austere eloquence. In this little work he has reproduced the genius of Pascal and of Molière."

In all these fables La Fontaine struggled to discover and express wherein lies the fear of death. When his own end was close at hand he seemed for the first time to realise what that fear was. "To die is nothing," he wrote to his friend Maucroix; "but think of it, I shall have to appear before God." There, to him, was the supreme awe. But in "La Mort et le Mourant" he does not dwell on this grave side of the question. On the contrary, he suggests that it is well to meet death with a welcoming smile, and he shows surprise that this attitude is so rarely attained.

"La Mort avoit raison. Je voudrois qu'à cet âge
On sortît de la vie ainsi que d'un banquet,
Remerciant son hôte, et qu'on fît son paquet;
Car de combien peut-on retarder le voyage?
Tu murmures, vieillard! Vois ces jeunes mourir,
Vois-les marcher, vois-les courir
A des morts, il est vrai, glorieuses et belles,
Mais sûres cependant, et quelquefois cruelles.
J'ai beau te le crier; mon zèle est indiscret;
Le plus semblable aux morts meurt le plus à regret."¹

¹ "Sure, Death was right; 'twere well that at ripe years
One should quit life without regrets or fears,
Rise from its banquet like a well-fed guest,
And pack one's baggage up, and thank the host,
Then take the road; for brief the time at most
The unwilling foot can lag behind the rest.
You murmur, aged traveller? see, the young
Die with light heart—yea, rush on death in view;
Deaths such as Fame's ennobling voice hath sung,
Glorious and bright, yet sharp and painful too—
I waste my words: I lay my moral by;
The old, half dead, are yet most loath to die."¹

Passing over the familiar "Le Renard et la Cicogne," and "Le Coq et la Perle," Fable XXII., "Le Chêne et le Roseau," closes Book I. This story of the Oak and the Rush, rendered by Æsop, Babrius, Abstemius, Corrozet, and many others, was said to be the author's especial favourite. The poet's art lies in the manner in which he allows the reader to assist at the dispute rather than to be merely a curious auditor of a quarrel.

"The Oak said to the Rush (when oaks could talk),
 'Nature has dealt but hardly with you, friend ;
 The wren's light weight sits heavy on your stalk ;
 The lightest breeze that for a moment's space
 Ruffles the water's face
 Will make you bend.'"

And he proceeds to explain the benefits granted to himself, the height, the strength which nothing can overcome.

"Then the Rush spake—
 'Your pity shows a generous heart, 'tis true ;
 But pray be not uneasy for my sake :
 Storms are less dangerous to me than you—
 I bend, but do not break.'"

Translation, REV. W. LUCAS COLLINS.

In this story La Fontaine expresses something he truly felt. He often found it wise to bend before circumstances and to allow the storm to burst safely over his head. When the wind had passed by he looked up again, gaily enough.

Book II. of the "Fables" contains twenty in number, most of them taken from Æsop. In No. I,

“Contre ceux qui ont le goût difficile,” the poet expounds the art of fable-writing :

“Were I a pet of fair Calliope,
I would devote the gifts conferr’d on me
To dress in verse old Æsop’s lies divine;
For verse, and they, and truth do well combine.”

“But,” he continues, “not being sufficiently a favourite of Parnassus, I do not know how to ornament these charming stories. One should give lustre to their glories. One might do it—I try to do it; and a wiser person would succeed. At all events, I have made the wolf speak and the lamb respond. And, better still, trees and plants have become gifted with tongue under my tuition.” On this point La Fontaine rather prided himself, although it was said to be against the rules of good fable-writing that anything lower than the animals should be permitted a place in the *dramatis personæ* of the poem.

To his boast the critics take exception :

“‘Ah,’ say the critics; ‘hear what vaunting!
From one whose work, all told, no more is
Than half a dozen baby stories.’”

La Fontaine defends his art against all cavillers, and the discussion proceeds now for, now against, until the author, growing wearied of an argument that proves inconclusive, cries :

“A curse on critics! hold your tongue!”

and winds up his fable with the sage conclusion :

"Some men, more nice than wise,
There's nought that satisfies."

The most familiar stories in this book are "La Chauve-souris et les deux Belettes¹"; "L'Aigle et l'Escarbot," in which the poet makes John Rabbit attempt to hide himself in a beetle's burrow; "Le Lion et le Moucheron," a lesson in satire, as Rousseau called it; the story of the two asses, one loaded with sponges and one with salt; and "Le Lion et le Rat," in which the smaller animal performs a favour to the royal quadruped.

"The rat ran up, with grateful glee,
Gnawed off a rope, and set him free."

Book III. begins with the fable dedicated to M. Maucroix, which Voltaire described as "excellent of its style." Taine praises it for colour, expressive metaphors, and rustic savour. "Les Grenouilles qui demandent un Roi" and the ever-familiar "Renard et les Raisins," supposed by some to be pointed by La Fontaine at Ninon and the disappointed Grand Prieur, are both from Æsop. "Le Lion devenu Vieux," already quoted, is from Phædrus. Following it is the pathetic story of "Philomèle et Progné." Progne and Philomela were sisters. The former was

¹ Which begins:

"A blundering bat once struck her head
Into a wakeful weasel's bed."

Queen of Thrace and was transformed into a swallow.
Her sister was changed into a nightingale.

Mme de Sévigné referred to this fable many times in her letters to her daughter.

Progne flies from the town and its church spires to seek the bosky dell where her poor enchanted sister sings. She begs her to leave the woods and fly back with her, because the sight of trees must bring to mind their past troubles.

“Should you by deserts be engrossed?
Come, be the city's pride and boast.
Besides, the woods remind of harms
That Tereus in them did your charms.”

Tereus, King of Thrace, cut out Philomela's tongue and imprisoned her.

“The thought of that so cruel wrong
Makes me, from age to age,
Prefer this hermitage;
For nothing like the sight of men
Can call up what I suffered then.”

Following “*Philomèle et Progné*” comes “*La Femme Noyée*,” which is a similar subject to one chosen by Verdizotti and by Marie de France. Voltaire thought this fable insipid, and blamed La Fontaine for it, whereas in fact the same story was used by many writers, and, as Walckenaer aptly remarks, is none the better for that. The point lies in the reference to feminine perversity, and probably in gay society a laugh was raised at the idea of the drowning

woman being carried through sheer contrariness in the opposite direction to that in which the stream flowed. When the despairing husband inquires of the passers-by whether they have seen his wife he receives from them only discouraging answers.

“‘No,’ said another, ‘search above.
In that direction
She would have floated, by the love
Of contradiction.’”

Book IV. opened with the well-known fable “*Le Lion Amoureux*,” dedicated to Mlle de Sévigné, which begins with the lines :

“Sévigné, de qui les attrait
Servent aux Grâces de modèle,
Et qui naquîtes toute belle,
A votre indifférence près,
Pourriez vous être favorable
Aux jeux innocents, d’une fable,
Et voir, sans vous épouvanter,
Un lion qu’amour sut dompter ?”¹

This fable was probably inspired by an incident which happened when the Ballet royal de la Naissance de Vénus was performed at Court in 1665. The King took the part of Alexandre, Henriette d’Orléans

¹ “Sévigné, type of every grace,
In female form and face,
In your regardlessness of men,
Can you show favour when
The sportive fable craves your ear,
And see, unmoved by fear,
A lion’s haughty heart
Thrust through by Love’s audacious dart.”

of Roxane, and Omphale was played by Mlle de Sévigné. Her beauty was striking, and for that evening at least Louis showed signs of being captivated. But Mlle de Sévigné was cold in temperament, and her mother before all was prudent. It became not even necessary to consider the removal of the lion's teeth and claws in order that the royal kiss might be less dangerous. The King was tempted by more suitable prey, and Mme de Sévigné gave her daughter in marriage to the Marquis de Grignan.

In "La Mouche et la Fourmi," another fable touching on society life, a distinction is made between the idler at Court and the genuine worker. The fly, aptly called by La Fontaine "la fille de l'air," boasts her superiority. She is, she declares, a frequenter of *salons*, of *alcôves*, of *ruelles*. She adopts the mien of a *précieuse*, and feasts and dances giddily, sipping pleasure wherever possible. To the ant is once more given the thankless task of doing the world's work patiently, untiringly, and without complaint. She casts at her lively companion the unpleasant name of parasite, and, having taken the only revenge in her power, ends the conversation with

"Work waits, time flies; adieu."

To this book belong also the well-known story of the Man and the Wooden Image and a satire of vanity, the Jay which dresses in the feathers of the Peacock. The same human failing is held up to

ridicule in "Le Corbeau voulant imiter l'Aigle," "La Grenouille qui se veut faire aussi grosse que le Bœuf," and "L'Ane portant des Reliques."

The first fable of Book V. was dedicated to the Chevalier de Bouillon, who was a frequenter of the Temple and friend of Chaulieu. It was called "Le Bûcheron et Mercure," and opens with the lines :

"Votre goût a servi de règle à mon ouvrage :
J'ai tenté les moyens d'acquérir son suffrage."¹

It was argued from this prologue that La Fontaine laboured over his art more than he cared to confess. The familiar stories of the earthenware and iron pot, of the fox who tried to set the fashion in short tails and expected his brethren to follow it ; of the goose that laid the golden eggs—La Fontaine makes her a hen—the mountain which brought forth a mouse, and of the ass clothed in a lion's skin are included in Book V., the moral of the last being a reflection on the genuineness of the poet's countrymen:

"In France the men are not a few
Of whom this fable proves too true ;
Whose valour chiefly doth reside
In coat they wear and horse they ride."²

¹ "Your taste has served my work to guide ;
To gain its suffrage I have tried."

² "Force gens font du bruit en France
Par qui cet apologue est rendu familier,
Un équipage cavalier
Fait les trois quarts de leur vaillance."

In the sixth book are twenty-one more fables, including many that are familiar—the stories of the hare and the tortoise, the dog that dropped the meat in trying to snatch the shadow, the carter who cried to Hercules when his cart stuck in the mud, Phœbus and Boreas, and one that has always been a favourite amongst the French, “*Le Cochet, le Chat, et le Souriceau*,” derived from Abstemius and made use of by Verdizotti. The story concerns a mouse who is terrified by the appearance of the cock, and charmed by that of the cat. Having taken a journey, he describes his experiences to his mother, who warns him of his danger and points out that appearances are often deceptive. In this poem life is viewed through the eyes of one of the most timid of God’s creatures :

“‘When lo! two creatures met my wondering eyes,
 The one of gracious mien, benign and mild ;
 The other fierce and wild,
 With high-pitched voice that filled me with alarm ;
 A lump of sanguine flesh grew on his head,
 And with a kind of arm
 He raised himself in air,
 As if to hover there ;
 His tail was like a horseman’s plume outspread,’
 (It was a farmyard Cock, you understand,
 That our young friend described in terms so grand,
 As ’twere some marvel come from foreign land.)
 ‘ With arms raised high
 He beat his sides, and made such hideous cry,
 That even I,

Brave as I am, thank Heaven! had well-nigh fainted.
 Straightway I took to flight,
 And cursed him left and right.
 Ah! but for him I might have got acquainted
 With that sweet creature,
 Who bore attractiveness in every feature;
 A velvet skin he had, like yours and mine,
 A tail so long and fine,
 A sweet, meek countenance, a modest air
 Yet what an eye was there!
 I feel that, on the whole,
 He must have strong affinities of soul
 With our great race—our ears are shaped the same.
 I should have made my bow and asked his name,
 But at the fearful cry
 Raised by that monster, I was forced to fly.'”

Translation, REV. W. LUCAS COLLINS.

At the close of Book VI. there are some refreshing verses entitled “*La Jeune Veuve.*” Chamfort said, “The only fault this fable possesses is that it is not a fable.” Here the poet’s natural charm and lightness of touch are seen to as much advantage as in the “*Contes,*” and there is nothing indecorous. The story tells of a woman’s fickleness. Being left a young widow she laments the death of her husband sincerely. She cries that she cannot live without him, she disfigures her face with weeping, wears the ugliest weeds and answers her father’s suggestion that she should let the dead be and turn her thoughts to the living by declaring that a convent is the only place for her. But presently time heals the wound :

“Entre la veuve d’une année
Et la veuve d’une journée
La différence est grande ; on ne croiroit jamais
Que ce fût la même personne.”

She is quite gay again. Games, laughter, and dancing return to her house, pretty frocks and frivolous adornments replace the garments that spoke of her loss ; she no longer avoids gay company, but makes the most of her attractions, and then she remembers her father’s advice and a promise he made her.

“On se plonge soir et matin
Dans la fontaine de Jouvence
Le père ne craint plus ce défunt tant chéri ;
Mais comme il ne parloit de rien à notre belle :
‘Où donc est le jeune mari
Que vous m’avez promis ?’ dit-elle.”¹

In the epilogue to Book VI., La Fontaine expressed his determination to turn back to Psyché :

“Bornons ici cette carrière :
Les longs ouvrages me font peur
Loin d’épuiser une matière,
On n’en doit prendre que la fleur.
Il s’en va temps que je reprenne
Un peu de forces et d’haleine

¹ “And thus by night and morn,
She plunged, to tell the truth,
Deep in the fount of youth.
Her sire no longer fear’d
The dead so much endear’d ;
But, as he never spoke,
Herself the silence broke :
‘Where is that youthful spouse,’ said she,
Whom, sir, you lately promised me ?”

Pour fournir à d'autres projets.
 Amour, ce tyran de ma vie,
 Veut que je change de sujets ;
 Il faut contenter son envie.
 Retournons à Psyché . . ." ¹

The additions in the reprint of the Fables which appeared in 1871 were : "Le Lion," "Le Loup et le Renard," "Le Coche et la Mouche," "Le Trésor et les deux Hommes," "Le Rat et l'Huître," "Le Singe et le Chat," "Le Gland et la Citrouille," "Le Milan et le Rossignol," and "L'Huître et les Plaideurs."

The collection, which contained a number of poems, was dedicated to the Duc de Guise, who died four months after the publication of the volume. In it La Fontaine praises the martial courage of the young duke, who at the age of eighteen had followed Louis XIV. to do battle in Franche-Comté, and had shown great military acumen worthy of the traditions of his house. That house was unfortunately to end, four years after his own death, on the death of his little son.

This volume was mentioned by Mme de Sévigné in

¹ "Here check we our career ;
 Long books I greatly fear.
 I would not quite exhaust my stuff ;
 The flower of subjects is enough.
 To me, the time is come, it seems,
 To draw my breath for other themes.
 Love, tyrant of my life, commands
 That other work be on my hands.
 I dare not disobey,
 Once more shall Psyché be my lay."

her letter to her daughter from Livry dated April 29th, 1671. She sent it with some other books to Mme de Grignan and asked her what she thought of the fables. "We were charmed with them the other day at M. de la Rochefoucauld's house. We are learning by heart that about the monkey and the cat." Then she quoted some lines, not quite correctly :

"D'animaux malfaisants c'étoit un très-bon plat :
Ils n'y craignoient tous deux aucun, quel qu'il pût être.
Trouvoit-on quelque chose au logis de gâté,
L'on ne s'en prenoit point aux gens du voisinage :
Bertrand déroboit tout ; Raton, de son côté,
Étoit moins attentif aux souris qu'au fromage,"¹

"and the rest. This is painting, and 'La Citrouille et Le Rossignol,' they are worthy of the first volume."

Chamfort cannot give praise enough to the fable of the monkey and the cat. "Here at length is an apologue worthy of La Fontaine," he wrote. "The two animals who are actors in the piece appear in it in their true characters. The reader is actually present at the scene. The picture of the cat raking the chestnuts out of the fire is worthy of Teniers."

Yet he did not altogether approve of the moral :

¹ "More mischievous codgers
Ne'er mess'd from a platter, since platters were flat.
Was anything wrong in the house or about it,
The neighbours were blameless—no mortal could doubt it;
For Bertrand was thievish, and Ratto so nice,
More attentive to cheese than he was to the mice."

"Aussi ne le sont pas la plupart de ces princes
 Qui, flattés d'un pareil emploi,
 Vont s'échauder en des provinces,
 Pour le profit de quelque roi."¹

La Fontaine knew what he was talking about.

The other fables referred to by Mme de Sévigné were called "Le Gland et la Citrouille" and "Le Milan et le Rossignol." The former tells the story of the rustic who thinks the pumpkin would be a worthier fruit for the noble oak than the tiny insignificant acorn. But when he sleeps beneath the tree and one of the despised acorns falls upon his nose, he finds cause to change his opinion.

"'O! O!' he cried; 'I bleed! I bleed!
 And this is what has done the deed!
 But, truly, what had been my fate,
 Had this had half a pumpkin's weight!
 I see that God had reasons good,
 And all His works well understood';
 Thus home he went in humbler mood."

The story of the Kite and the Nightingale is less amusing, and tells of the bird of prey who refuses to release its victim because she has had the honour of singing before a king. Music has no charms for the faint and hungry.

"Ventre affamé n'a point d'oreilles."

¹ "No more are the princes, by flattery paid
 For furnishing help in a different trade,
 And burning their fingers to bring
 More power to some mightier king."



MME DE MONTESPAN

These three fables appear in Book III., Part IV., of the first complete editions published in 1678-9, now numbered Book IX.

Ten years had passed since the issue of the first six books, ten years during which events had not stood still at the Court of France. Louis XIV. was now nearing middle age. He had been on the throne for thirty-five years. The French monarchy had reached and almost passed its zenith of glory. Europe stood amazed at the most brilliant pageant of royalty the world had seen. The ten years between the publication of the first six and the next five books of fables were years in which the King had grown steadily more powerful, more autocratic, more grandiose. Favourites had risen and been superseded. La Vallière was forgotten, La Montespan had reigned, a dangerous and splendid reign, for ten long years. For eight of these ten Mme Scarron, the governess, had been slowly emerging into Mme de Maintenon, the counsellor and friend. And La Fontaine, whose bid for favour in dedicating the first fables to the Dauphin had been nullified by the King's displeasure at the surreptitious appearance of too many "Contes," made an even more direct appeal to the King's good-nature by dedicating the second collection to Mme de Montespan, begging her to protect henceforth the favoured book.

Moreover, in his epilogue to the collection he sang the praises of the King, who in 1678 had concluded the peace of Nimeguen.

"All Europe to our Sovereign yields,
And learns upon her battle-fields,
To bow before the noblest plan
That ever monarch formed, or man."

The seal had been put upon La Fontaine's reputation as a fabulist, and Louis XIV. was not slow to acknowledge graciously this tribute of genius which had nothing in it offensive to taste or morals. Phrases expressive of the King's esteem for the author and his works were printed in the privilege of this edition.

La Fontaine was allowed to offer the volume in person to Louis XIV. Arrived at Versailles, he made a complimentary speech to the Sovereign and was awarded a purse containing a liberal sum in gold.

But alas! the Bonhomme's absent-mindedness was in evidence that day. At the critical moment he discovered he had not brought the gift-volume with him, and, upset by his carelessness, he left the King's present in the carriage which conveyed him from the palace. None of his animal courtiers could have behaved with less discretion in the presence of their lion-sovereign!

CHAPTER IX

THE FABLES (Continued)

OF all La Fontaine's fables, the first one of the second collection, "Les Animaux malades de la Peste," has perhaps received most praise. Execution, choice of topic, and moral application are equally to be applauded. The story deals with almost the whole gamut of society. To describe an assembly of the animals engaged in discussing a public misfortune is both daring and original. The poet owed something to Haudent¹ and Gueroult,² but in the main conception he has worked the theme out for himself. The animals are attacked by the plague :

"They died not all, but all were sick."

The lion-king calls a council in order that the cause of the disaster may be discovered and prompt measures be taken to avert the scourge sent by Heaven as a punishment for sin. Some sacrifice to the gods is deemed necessary, and it is proposed to immolate the guiltiest beast. The courtiers, including the fox,

¹ La Confession de l'Asne, du Regnard, et du Loup.

² Fable du Lyon, du Loup, et de l'Asne.

the tiger, the bear, and the dogs, propound their views and escape from judgment, although they have been gluttonous and have eaten flesh-food. But the ass, who strayed away into a grassy meadow and succumbed to natural hunger, having devoured that which was another's, has been guilty of unpardonable offence and must die. The moral is self-evident :

“Selon que vous serez puissant ou misérable,
Les jugements de cour vous rendront blanc ou noir.”¹

Book VII. contains many good things. “Le Rat qui s'est retiré du monde” tells of a rat who retires from the world, making a hermitage of a Dutch cheese. He refuses to give material assistance to his fellow rats who ask for his advice when Ratopolis is threatened by an invasion of cats.

“The sage Levantines have a tale
About a rat that weary grew
Of all the cares that life assail,
And to a Holland cheese withdrew.
His solitude was there profound,
Extending through his world so round.”

There he provides for himself a goodly store of provender, and grew “fair, fat, and round,” but is without a spark of generosity. When the rats arrive to beg their slight boon he will not listen :

“‘My friends,’ the hermit said,
‘To worldly things I’m dead.

¹ “Thus human courts acquit the strong
And doom the weak, as therefore wrong.’

How can a poor recluse
 To such a mission be of use?
 What can he do but pray
 That God will aid it on its way?"

The poet manages to convey a sly hit at the monasteries, and the whole is so human as to be entirely delightful.

"Que désignai-je, à votre avis,
 Par ce rat si peu secourable?
 Un moine? Non, mais un dervis :
 Je suppose qu'un moine est toujours charitable."¹

Fable X., "La Laitière et le Pot au Lait" is the well-known story of the nimble young woman who counted her chickens before they were hatched. Number XI. is the quaint conceit entitled "Le Curé et le Mort," which awakened a discussion on the subject of Chouart. It was contested by some that this gentleman was a real personage, and by others that he was borrowed from Rabelais. Mme de Sévigné wrote about this story to Mme de Grignan on March 9th, 1672.

"There is a little fable by La Fontaine which he has made upon an adventure which happened to M. de Boufflers' curé, who was killed in the carriage close by him. The adventure is extraordinary.

¹ "What think you, reader, is the service
 For which I use this niggard rat?
 To paint a monk? No, but a dervise,
 A monk, I think, however fat,
 Must be more bountiful than that."

The fable is charming, but not to be compared with those which follow. I do not know what he means by the *Pot au Lait*." The reference was to the last lines of the fable :

"Proprement toute notre vie
Est le curé Chouart, qui sur son mort comptoit,
Et la fable du Pot au Lait."¹

These two fables with much the same moral were composed one after the other, but neither of them was printed until 1678, when "*Le Pot au Lait*" immediately preceded "*Le Curé et le Mort*." At the time of writing her letter Mme de Sévigné was not familiar with the former. She had given her daughter full details of the strange occurrence of the curé's death in a letter dated February 26th : "M. Boufflers has killed a man since his decease. The corpse was on a bier in a coach and was being taken about a league from Boufflers to be buried. The curé was with the body. The coach overturned and the bier broke the poor curé's neck."

This incident is reproduced almost literally. The curate is counting the money which will accrue to him through the death of his patron :

"The Reverend John Cabbage-pate
Watched o'er the corpse as if it were

' "*The Pot of Milk, and fate
Of Curate Cabbage-pate,
As emblems do but give
The history of those that live.*"

A treasure needing guardian care ;
And all the while his looks elate
This language seemed to hold ;
'The dead will pay so much in gold,
So much in lights of molten wax,
So much in other sorts of tax':
With all he hoped to buy a cask of wine,
The best which thereabouts produced the vine.
A pretty niece, on whom he doted,
And eke his chambermaid, should be promoted,
By being newly petticoated . . .
The coach upset, and dashed to pieces,
Cut short these thoughts of wine and nieces !
There lay poor John with broken head,
Beneath the coffin of the dead !"

The question as to whether Chouart was drawn from a real person against whom the poet was supposed to bear a grudge is a matter of no great importance. Those who supported the flesh-and-blood theory were Abbé Choquet and Auguste Rey. The Abbé wrote to Fréron that the Curé Choart (as he spelled the name) really existed. He belonged to a very distinguished family, was a doctor of theology of the Faculty of Paris, and curé of Saint-Germain-le-Vieux. He was a friend of Boileau, Racine, and La Fontaine. One day when the illustrious companions were regaling themselves at table with flagons of champagne, Boileau and Racine, as their custom was, began preaching on the subject of La Fontaine's separation from his wife. Chouart added his advice to that given by the others, and

La Fontaine, regarding this as a liberty from one who was not on such familiar terms with him as Boileau and Racine, peremptorily ordered him to cease reproach and intone a "Gloria in excelsis."

Auguste Rey agreed in the main with Abbé Choquet, but gave different details in an article which appeared in the *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de Paris*, 1905. The name of the original, he said, was Jean-Baptiste Choart, who was appointed curé to Saint-Germain-le-Vieux in 1674. He was a bad administrator, haughty and violent, fond of insulting churchwardens and parishioners, and always causing complaints. Rey thought this man picked a quarrel with La Fontaine at Château Magny-Saint-Loup, which belonged to the Choart family. The poet visited this spot now and again, and it was said he composed several fables there.

The cause of the quarrel, however, is uncertain. According to one account it arose from La Fontaine's slovenly habits. He was handing a cup of coffee to one of the ladies present, when Choart intervened, because he objected to the poet's manners, and, knocking the cup out of his hand, spilt the contents over the Bonhomme's clothes.

Without more solid grounds to go upon it is easier to believe with Walckenaer and others that La Fontaine borrowed his curé's name from Rabelais, a source quite familiar to him and from which he derived other references of a similar character.

Several of the fables in this book deal with Fortune. There is the story of two friends, of whom one goes forth to seek fair Fortune at Court. Failing to find her, and travelling to India and Japan in his restless pursuit, he returns disappointed, only to find the lady sitting on the doorstep of his friend's house.

The idea is similar to that of "Les deux Pigeons," which tells us that happiness and good fortune are close beside us if only we know how to grasp them. Saint-Marc Girardin wrote sagely : "Never complain because Fortune is blind. I confess that when I think about it I am convinced that it is a great blessing for mankind that Fortune is blind. Nothing is so comforting both to vanity and merit. Indeed nothing is so convenient and so advantageous for the world's commerce. Where should we be if we believed that Fortune made an equal distribution of her favours and that every one she smiled upon merited her attention? And where should we be, on the other hand, if we were forced to believe that those whom Fate had sent flying headlong from top to bottom deserved their fall, and that the unfortunate had only received their due? . . . There are a number of agreeable illusions which depend on the bandage Fortune wears over her eyes. Whoever tears it off will be an enemy to men and gods."

The last fable of Book VII. is "Un Animal dans la Lune," and refers to the story about Sir Paul Neal of the Royal Society of London, who, believing he had discovered an animal in the moon, found he had

taken observation of an unlucky mouse which had become imprisoned between the lenses of his telescope. This story was referred to by Samuel Butler, author of "Hudibras," in his "Elephant in the Moon," which was intended as a satire upon the Royal Society. The members, it was suggested, betrayed a whimsical fondness for wonderful experiments in natural history. La Fontaine deplored the fact that France, busied with war, had not time to devote to science like peaceful England. The fable was written about 1677. France was then wearied of exhausting battles. "We wish for peace, but do not sigh," wrote the fabulist.

"The English Charles the secret knows
To make the most of his repose.

Yet could he but their quarrel quell,
What incense-clouds would grateful swell!"

The idea recurs in Fable IV. of Book VIII.

"But save us from the woeful harms
Of Europe roused in hostile arms.

Comes not the time for Louis to repose?
What Hercules, against these hydra foes
Would not grow weary?"

This poem which sets forth the Power of Fables was addressed to M. de Barrillon, who was La Fontaine's friend. He was at this time French Ambassador at the Court of Saint-James, where he stayed until

the King's downfall. The prologue of the fable, which was rather weak, begins :

“ La qualité d'ambassadeur
Peut-elle s'abaisser à des contes vulgaires ?
Vous puis-je offrir mes vers et leurs grâces légères ? ”¹

The poet's purpose in writing the lines was to get the ambassador to do what he could in the cause of peace, and the result proves conclusively that the fable is not the best vehicle by which to convey political suggestions.

Fable VI. is the curious story, taken from Absternius, of the woman who is unable to keep a secret, and who, when her husband tells her he has laid an egg, believes his word without question and rushes to her neighbour to discuss this miracle, in spite of her promise to her husband to say nothing about it.

In the end the story becomes so much embellished in rolling from one to another that the poor man is described as having laid a hundred eggs.

In Fable XI. La Fontaine sets forth the beauties of friendship ; of which he was well qualified to speak.

“ Qu'un ami véritable est une douce chose,”

he sings, and, expressing the inner spirit of the bond :

“ L'un ne possédoit rien qui n'appartint à l'autre.”

¹ “ Can diplomatic dignity
To simple fables condescend ?
Can I your famed benignity
Invoke, my muse an ear to lend ? ”

He acted up to this principle when living with his friends who were endowed with more worldly goods than himself.

“Tircis et Amarante” (No. XIII.), which the poet dedicated to Mlle de Sillery, niece to the Duc de la Rochefoucauld, was more like an idyll or pastoral scene than a fable. In the prologue La Fontaine explains that he had intended to leave off writing fables for a while in order to add to his collection of “Contes,” but since so charming a lady desired another fable he was, of course, delighted to oblige her :

“J’avois Ésope quitté
Pour être tout à Boccace ;
Mais une divinité
Veut revoir sur le Parnasse
Des fables de ma façon.”

Book VIII. is one of the longest, containing twenty-seven fables. The last dozen are derived chiefly from Bidpai, Æsop, and Abstemius. The story of the funeral of the lioness from the last-named author throws some side-lights on the Court :

“The court a country seems to me,
Whose people are, no matter what,—
Sad, gay, indifferent, or not,—
As suits the will of majesty ;
Or, if unable so to be,
Their task it is to seem it all.”

When the stag refused to weep and mourn because the king’s consort was dead, he was able to avert his

majesty's ire by telling a story about meeting the shade of the lioness, who says there is no need of weeping since she roves in Elysian fields and is intensely happy :

“Amuse the ear of royalty
With pleasant dreams and flattery,—
No matter what you may have done,
Nor yet how high its wrath may run,
The bait is swallow'd—object won.”

Book IX. contains one of the greatest favourites, “*Les deux Pigeons*,” already referred to. This gracefully told and tender story of the brother pigeons appealed immensely to Mme de Sévigné, who referred to it over and over again in her letters.

In the original edition the “*Discours à Madame de la Sablière*” appeared at the end of Book IX., but most of the modern volumes make this poem the first in Book X., under the title of the fable “*Les deux Rats, le Renard, et l'Œuf*.”

The graceful address begins :

“You, Iris, 'twere an easy task to praise ;
But you refuse the incense of my lays.”

And the poet goes on to speak of Mme de la Sablière's intellectual attainments :

“The nectar, Iris, is of praises made.
You taste it not. But in its place
Wit, science, even trifles grace
Your bill of fare.”

This is the poem in which La Fontaine helped to dissemble the fact of Mme de la Sablière's learning, by referring to Descartes' theories concerning the mind of animals as though she had never heard of them. The subject was one which at that time was much discussed in the salons, and "Iris" knew far more about it than her poet, but their very transparent attempt at deception afforded amusement to both. In this long poem La Fontaine refers to John Sobieski :

"A prince beloved by Victory. . . .
The king whom Poland calls his own."

Sobieski had visited Mme de la Sablière's house, and at the time when the lines were written had just gained a victory over the Turks at Choczim (1673). In the following year he was offered the throne of Poland.

Fable VIII. of this Book is "Le chien à qui on a coupé les oreilles," the story of the dog who cries :

"What have I done, I'd like to know,
To make my master maim me so?"

and then finds that his short-cropped ears prove to be an advantage when fighting with other dogs. This fable has never been traced to its source, and is perhaps one of the few that are entirely original. The subject of "Les Lapins," No. XIV., was furnished by the Duc de la Rochefoucauld, to whom the poem is dedicated.

Book XI. opens with "Le Lion," which has a

political drift. It tells the story of Sultan Leopard, who consults with his Vizier Fox because in a neighbouring country a lion whelp had come to the throne, and the question arose as to the best policy with which to treat him. Was he to be thrust out of life before his teeth and claws had grown, or was he to be propitiated and turned into an ally? It seems probable that La Fontaine here again indicated the relationship between Louis XIV. and Charles II.

The fable ends with the moral :

“If you must let the lion grow,
Don't let him live to be your foe.”

The second fable was written for the Duc du Maine, son of Louis XIV. and Mme de Montespan. Born in March 1670, the little duke was legitimated in 1673, and was nine years old when the poem was published. It refers to his precocity :

“In him both love and reason
Sprang up before their season.”

He is presented with all the gifts of the gods :

“Said fiery Mars, ‘I take the part
To make him master of the art
Whereby so many heroes high
Have won the honours of the sky.’”

Hercules and Apollo add their gifts as well as Cupid.

Book XI. closed with the epilogue addressed to Louis XIV., which alludes to the peace of Nimeguen.

Book XII. was in the nature of an afterthought, being published in 1694. This swan's song was dedicated to the Duc de Bourgogne, son of the Dauphin, who was born in 1682 at Versailles. La Fontaine had already composed two *ballades* on the occasion of the prince's birth. The fabulist had by this time lost something of his cunning:

“Dear prince, a special favourite of the skies,
Pray let my incense from your altars rise.
With these her gifts, if rather late my muse,
My age and labours must her fault excuse.
My spirit wanes, while yours beams on the sight
At every moment with augmented light.”

The original lines were first printed in the *Mercure Galant* of December 1690. Several of the fables in this book are taken from themes suggested to the little prince by Fénelon, put into prose as a lesson, and versified by La Fontaine.

In Fable IX., “Le Loup et le Renard,” the poet expresses his surprise at the royal pupil's ability :

“Ce qui m'étonne est qu'à huit ans
Un prince en fable ait mis la chose,
Pendant que sous mes cheveux blancs
Je fabrique à force de temps
Des vers moins sensés que sa prose.”¹

¹ “I marvel that a prince is able
At eight to put the thing in fable;
While I, beneath my seventy snows,
Forge out, with toil and time,
The same in labour'd rhyme,
Less striking than his prose.”



LA CHAMPMESLÉ
From a painting at Rouen

And the poem closes with another reference to the help that the Duc de Bourgogne gave to the author in choosing the subject of his story :

“De votre esprit, que nul autre n'égale,
Prince, ma muse tient tout entier ce projet :
Vous m'avez donné le sujet,
Le dialogue et la morale.”¹

“Le Milan, le Roi, et le Chasseur” was dedicated to François-Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Conti, who was one of the poet's patrons. Fable XV., which tells of the friendship between the rat, the raven, tortoise, and gazelle,² was addressed to Mme de la Sablière, and was probably written about 1679, when she broke with La Fare. It first appeared in print in “Ouvrages de prose et poésie des Sieurs de Maucroix et de la Fontaine,” 1685. The opening passages contain a tribute to her charm, her beauty, and her salon :

“Her features, smiles, attractions there,—
Her art of pleasing without care,
Her loveliness that's sure of homage.
Some mortals kneeling at her feet,—

.

¹ “Young prince, to your unrivall'd wit
My muse gives credit, as is fit,
For what she here hath laboured with—
The subject, characters, and pith.”

² One authority suggests that the gazelle signified Mme de la Sablière, and the tortoise La Fontaine. In Mme de Sévigné's drawing-room Mme de la Sablière was known as “la tourterelle.”

O Iris, who canst charm the soul—
 Nay, bind it with supreme control,—
 Whom as myself I can but love,—
 (Nay, not that word ; as I'm a man,
 Your court has placed it under ban,
 And will dismiss it). . . .”

To Lady Harvey, who was then visiting at the English Embassy in Paris, and who was one of those who urged the poet to come to England, he dedicated the well-known fable “Le Renard Anglois.” His praise of the English nation rings with sincerity :

“ . . . Les Anglois pensent profondément ;
 Leur esprit, en cela, suit leur tempérament :
 Creusant dans les sujets, et forts d'expériences,
 Ils étendent partout l'empire des sciences.
 Je ne dis point ceci pour vous faire ma cour :
 Vos gens, à pénétrer, l'emportent sur les autres ;
 Même les chiens de leur séjour
 Ont meilleur nez que n'ont les nôtres.”¹

The last of the dedicated fables in Book XII. is No. XXIV., “Daphnis et Alcimadure,” to Marguerite, second daughter of Mme de la Sablière, who married M. de la Mésangère in 1678. The story, which is

¹ “With mind to match the outward case,
 The English are a thinking race.
 They pierce all subjects through and through ;
 Well arm'd with facts, they hew their way,
 And give to silence boundless sway.
 Quite free from flattery, I say,
 Your countrymen, for penetration,
 Must bear the palm from every nation ;
 For e'en the dogs they breed excel
 Our own in nicety of smell.”

imitated from Theocritus, opens with compliments to the woman who was later to become "La Marquise" of the imaginary conversations of Fontenelle's "La Pluralité des Mondes":

"Aimable fille d'une mère
A qui seule aujourd'hui mille cœurs font la cour,
Sans ceux que l'amitié rend soigneux de vous plaire,
Et quelques-uns encor que vous garde l'amour."¹

The subtle, graceful humour of the Fables is only to be found at its best in the originals. La Fontaine's work is so French in essence that translations can rarely be satisfactory. On account of this difficulty of transplantation La Fontaine failed for a long while to become a power outside his own country. While his fame spread speedily throughout France, he was little known in England or in Germany. On this side of the channel Saint-Evremond and the Duchesse de Mazarin did all they could do to make his name familiar to the society in which they moved, but to the general reader his work was still a sealed book. Not because the fable was not known in England, for many translations of Æsop, Phædrus, and others had long since awakened an interest in this style of literature, but because no one had as yet ventured

¹ "Offspring of her to whom, to-day,
While from thy lovely self away,
A thousand hearts their homage pay,
Besides the throngs whom friendship binds to please,
And some whom love presents thee on their knees."

to render the charming French verses into the cruder and colder language.

In 1692 Sir Roger L'Estrange first broke the ice by publishing "A Supplement of Fables," in which La Fontaine's name was found in company of those of Phædrus, Babrius, Abstemius, Æsop, Meslier, and others. The volume was reviewed in *The Gentleman's Journal* of January 1692: "Fables have ever been valued by the Ingenious. In France Monsieur de la Fontaine, esteem'd inimitable in his way, hath reviv'd them as the great master of our tongue Sir Roger L'Estrange hath done lately among us. . . . England may boast now of the best collection of fables in the world." But as far as La Fontaine was concerned, the book seemed to arouse very little attention, although it went into several editions.

Ten years passed before he was heard of again in print. Bernard de Mandeville issued a collection entitled "Some fables after the easie and familiar method of Monsieur de la Fontaine" (1703, quarto), in the introduction to which he told his readers, "I have writ some fables in verse after the familiar way of a great man in France, Monsieur de la Fontaine." A copy is at the Bodleian. At Trinity College, Dublin, a collection by the same author (1704, quarto) is entitled "Æsop dress'd, or a collection of fables writ in familiar verse," of which a reprint is at the British Museum in octavo, dated [1720?]. Mandeville was born in Holland, and probably had met with the

works of the fabulist on the Continent before he endeavoured to spread his knowledge of them in England.

The next we hear of La Fontaine on this side of the Channel is in September 1711, when Addison, who declared that "fables were the first pieces of wit that made their appearance in the world," wrote in No. 183 of *The Spectator*, "La Fontaine, by this way of writing, is come more into vogue than any other author of our times"; and the following year, in "Memoirs of Literature," the Fables are compared with the "Contes" to the great advantage of the former: "The fables of La Fontaine are very much above his tales; which is so true, that we have some other Tales as good as his, whereas nobody has been able to imitate his Fables."

Several people, however, tried, not too successfully, to translate them. Bernard Mandeville, whose version is not above reproach either in correctness of rendering or elegance of rhyme, was soon ignored. Allen Ramsay translated three of the fables in 1722.

In his advertisement he wrote "Some of the following are taken from Messieurs Fontaine and Lamotte, whom I have endeavoured to make speak Scots with as much ease as I can; at the same time aiming at the spirit of these eminent authors without being too servile a translator." A second edition appeared in 1730 containing thirty fables. He included eighteen fables by Lamotte, but only three by La Fontaine,

“The Ape and the Leopard,” “The Man with Twa Wives,” and “The Fable of the Condemned Ass” (“Les Animaux malades de la Peste”).

That Ramsay made La Fontaine speak Scots without stint is proved by the following lines from “The Fable of the Condemned Ass” :

“The lion signs his sentence ‘hang and draw,’
Sae poor lang lugs maun pay the kane for a’,”

and these from “The Man with Twa Wives” :

“But Bess, the Whig, a raving rump,
Took figmaliries and wald jump,
With sword and pistol by her side,
And cock-a-stride arowing ride,
On the hag-riden sumph, and grapple
Him hard and fast about the thrapple ;
And with her furious fingers whirlle,
Frae youthfu’ black ilk silver curle,”

which is taking a liberty if not degenerating into licence.

In 1723 Matthew Prior mentions the poet in his poem : “The Turtle and the Sparrow” :

“Now weigh the pleasure with the pain,
The plus and minus, loss and gain,
And what Lafontaine laughing says,
Is serious Truth in such a case ;
Who flights the evil finds it least,
And who does nothing does the best.”

In 1730 “A Literary Journal” declared the poet
“was very well known in England,” and *The Gentle-*

man's Magazine for 1732 stated that "in pleasantry of wit and a natural keenness in satyr, La Fontaine excelled all who went before him; Boccaccio receives new beauties from his manner, and has not only preserved but improved the delicacy of his turn."

Four years later a prose translation of a number of the "Contes" and Fables appeared under the title of "Fables and Tales from La Fontaine in French and English. Now first translated. To which is prefixed the Author's life."

The London Magazine for 1745 and *The Literary Magazine* for 1757 contained respectively a translation of "L'Amour et la Folie" (Book XII. 14) and of "Le Meunier et son Fils" (Book III. 1). The latter precedes a criticism of Foote's "The Author" with the explanation: "Before we give our opinion of this piece we must beg leave to present to the perusal of our readers the following translation of a fable from La Fontaine, written by a friend to this work, which, though very short of the elegance of the original, will serve to give the mere English reader some idea of La Fontaine's manner." This was presuming too much. "Le Meunier et son Fils" is not one of the poet's most characteristic fables. Foote used the subject matter to some extent in his prologue, but departed greatly from the original.

Imitations in English appeared in several magazines. In 1736 *The Gentleman's Magazine* printed "The Bat and the Two Weasels, a fable imitated from Monsieur

Fontaine." In 1748 the same periodical published "The Two Doves, a fable improv'd from Lafontaine." *The London Magazine*, *The Monthly Review*, and *The Grand Magazine of Universal Intelligence* all contained verses purporting to be after the manner of the French fabulist between 1754 and 1760. Walpole, too, was caught by the charm of La Fontaine, and in 1743 wrote "Patapan," or "The Little White Dog"; a tale imitated from La Fontaine which was never printed. He also composed verses about the fable of the lion grown old, and in 1751 imitated the "Funeral of the Lioness." In 1766 he wrote an ode for George Montagu which was in the manner of the fabulist.

Returning to the translations, in 1761 Baskerville printed for R. and J. Dodsley "Select Fables of Æsop and other Fabulists" in three books. Dodsley adapted rather than translated. He included ten of the La Fontaine fables, and, though he thought they erred on the side of being too profuse, he compared them favourably with those by L'Estrange. "His fables," he wrote in his "Essay on Fable," much of which was taken from Lamotte's discourse on the same subject, "are perhaps the best examples of the *genteel familiar* as Sir Roger L'Estrange affords the grossest, of the *indelicate* and *low*."

Before this edition there had appeared one of La Fontaine's "Contes" in English, "The Spectacles: a Tale," in verse, 1753. And in 1762 "Tales and

Novels in Verse" was issued with translations by Topham, Congreve, Steele, and others. Another translation of the Fables was Wallbeck's "Fables After the Manner of La Fontaine," 1787, which were perhaps rather an imitation than a translation.

This comparatively short list presumably includes all the translations into English published in the eighteenth century. The next chronologically was a volume which appeared in 1806, "La Fontaine's Fables," now first translated from the French, by Robert Thomson, printed in Paris. This was in verse. In his preface Thomson wrote that La Fontaine was only known in England by "some wretched translations in prose." He qualified this remark by adding: "Unknown, I ought to have said, entirely unknown; at least in all the performances I have seen, wearing the mask of his name, I see nothing but La Fontaine wholly misunderstood, mangled or murdered."

Besides Thomson's edition there were very few translations of La Fontaine between 1800 and 1850, the best known being "Fables in Verse, from Æsop, La Fontaine, and others," by Mary Anne Davis (1813); a few of the Tales (1814); "Fables in Verse," by John Matthews (1820); "The Enchanted Flute, with other poems and Fables from La Fontaine," by E. P. Wolferstan (1823); "La Fontaine: a present for the young from the French"; an American edition published at Boston in 1839; and Elizur Wright's translation, first published in America 1841, reprinted in

England 1842, and completed in Bohn's edition of 1846, from which the translations in this volume are drawn unless otherwise stated.

In France La Fontaine had as wide and enduring an influence as it is vouchsafed to most literary men to possess. Imitations of the "Contes" and Fables abounded, but never equalled the original work. La Harpe was right when he said that La Fontaine's art died with him.

Men who worked in the same field were Dodsley, Croxall, and Gay in England, Hagedorn, Gellert, and Lessing in Germany, Aubert, Richer and Houdart de Lamotte in France. Against these writers La Fontaine held his own. His fables in the eyes of little children were without rival, as may be gathered from a typical story told by the Abbé de Pons. The Abbé was a staunch admirer of Houdart de Lamotte and all his works. One day he gave copies of two fables to a six-year-old nephew, telling him to learn them by heart. The one was by his favourite author, the other by La Fontaine. When the Abbé returned to hear them recited, the child repeated the latter glibly, but had been unable to commit to memory a single line of the former. Horrified at this lack of understanding, the Abbé rushed to his favourite café, and in an excited voice told every one he saw that he was afraid his nephew would come to a bad end—he showed such execrable taste.

CHAPTER X

POEMS AND DRAMAS

LA FONTAINE wrote four long poems besides "Psyché," "Adonis," and the fragments of the "Songe de Vaux," and three of the four belong to his later years. Taken in conjunction with the Tales and the Fables they show the versatility of which he was capable and which, to judge from lines addressed to Mme de la Sablière, he was inclined to regret :

"Papillon du Parnasse et semblable aux abeilles,
A qui le bon Platon compare nos merveilles.
Je suis chose légère et vole à tout sujet,
Je vais de fleur en fleur, et d'objet en objet.
A beaucoup de plaisir je mêle un peu de gloire,
J'irois plus haut peut-être au Temple de Mémoire,
Si dans un genre seul j'avois usé mes jours.
Mais quoi ? Je suis volage en vers comme en amour."

¹ "Parnassian Butterfly, and like the bee,
To which our wonders are compar'd by Plato,
Thus light am I ; fly swift to every subject,
And rove from flower to flower, from shade to shade.
Fame I admire, but pleasure is my idol.
Perhaps my name had soar'd to greater heights,
Had I not turned to diverse styles of writing
And proved as fickle in poetry as love."

Of the four perhaps the most charming is the idyll "Philémon et Baucis," derived from Ovid, dedicated to the Duc de Vendôme and first printed in 1685. The closing lines express the poet's wish to go to the Duke's country-seat, Anet, the famous château built for Diane de Poitiers, where the unruly young descendants of Gabrielle d'Estrées sowed many of their wild oats and gathered round them the kindred spirits who later formed the society of the Temple. La Fontaine was not averse to be included among those who should reproduce at Anet the Aonian valley :

" . . . Puissions-nous chanter sous les ombrages
Des arbres dont ce lieu va border ses rivages.
Pussent-ils tout d'un coup élever leurs sourcis,
Comme on vit autrefois Philémon et Baucis."

When he describes the metamorphosis of the constant lovers into trees, the poet for once discards his cynicism about marriage and speaks from the heart :

" Même instant, même sort à leur fin les entraîne ;
Baucis devient tilleul, Philémon devient chêne.
On les va voir encore, afin de mériter
Les douceurs qu'en hymen Amour leur fit goûter :
Ils courbent sous le poids des offrandes sans nombre.
Pour peu que des époux séjournent sous leur ombre,
Ils s'aiment jusqu'au bout, malgré l'effort des ans.
Ah ! si . . . Mais autre part j'ai porté mes présents."

The sigh in the last line has been construed by Saint-Marc Girardin as the "only expression showing a vocation for matrimony in the whole of La

Fontaine's works." By such small things a man stands condemned.

Another of the poems, "Les Filles de Minée," is also taken from Ovid, and was first published with "Philémon et Baucis" in the collection entitled "Ouvrages de prose et de poésie des sieurs de Maucroix et de la Fontaine (1685)." It contains two minor threads besides the original theme—one drawn from Boccaccio, the other the famous tragedy of "Pyramus and Thisbe." The lion, having chased Thisbe and torn and bespattered the veil she has dropped, is balked of his prey when she hides from him among the trees, but Pyramus believes the worst has happened.

"Pyrame arrive, et voit ces vestiges tout frais :
O dieux ! que devient-il ! Un froid court dans ses veines.
Il aperçoit le voile étendu dans ces plaines,
Il le lève ; et le sang, joint aux traces des pas,
L'empêche de douter d'un funeste trépas.
'Thisbé,' s'écria-t-il, 'Thisbé, je t'ai perdue !
Te voilà, par ma faute, aux enfers descendue !'"

And so the tragedy works up to its climax. Thisbé takes the poignard with which Pyramus has killed himself and thrusts it in her own heart :

"Sa main et le poignard font alors leur office ;
Elle tombe, et tombant, range ses vêtements :
Dernier trait de pudeur même aux derniers moments.
Les nymphes d'alentour lui donnèrent des larmes
Et du sang des amants teignirent par des charmes
Le fruit d'un mûrier proche, et blanc jusqu'à ce jour,
Éternel monument d'un si parfait amour."

At the instigation of the solitaries of Port Royal, La Fontaine wrote the story of a very different pair of lovers, in his poem entitled "*La Captivité de Saint-Malc.*" The verses were dedicated to Cardinal de Bouillon with the hope that "the idyll, apart from the saintliness of the subject, will not appear to you to be utterly bereft of poetical beauty." The idea was taken from an epistle by Saint Jerome, translated into French by Arnold d'Andilly, and was one with which the poet was not in sympathy, for it proclaimed the absolute sanctity of the vow of chastity.

The verses were first published by Barbin in 1673, and tell the narrative of two individuals of noble birth and of opposite sex who have vowed to live a life of celibacy, and who, by the fate of war, are taken prisoners, condemned to slavery, and forced into the marriage bond. Their mutual love is the cause of a deadly struggle to maintain their vows under the greatest of difficulties and temptations. At length they flee and hide in the cave of a lioness, who takes them under her protection. At the conclusion the man is immured in a monastery, the woman in a convent, and at the foot of the altar they demand a celestial reward for their self-denial and sacrifice.

A much less exacting subject was dealt with by the poet in "*Le Quinquina*," written for the Duchesse de Bouillon and first published in 1682. The best part of this lengthy and forced poem, which

extolled the remedy newly introduced into Europe about 1638, was a little fable at the conclusion about Jupiter and his two casks, out of which the god doled a mixture of good and evil to human beings at their birth.

“De nous les enseigner Pandore prit le soin.
Sa boîte se trouva de poisons trop remplie :
Pour dispenser les biens et les maux de la vie,
En deux tonneaux à part l'un et l'autre fut mis.
Ceux de nous que Jupin regarde comme amis
Puisent à leur naissance en ces tonnes fatales
Un mélange des deux par portions égales ;
Le reste des humains abonde dans les maux
Au seuil de son palais Jupin mit ces tonneaux.”

About a fourth part of all La Fontaine's work was composed in a dramatic form. From the first days when he thought of becoming an author, his ambition was to succeed in writing for the stage. Later his friendship with Molière and Racine stimulated this passion which was never to be completely satisfied. Apart from a few fragments his dramatic writings are comparatively poor. His first attempt, the translation of Terence's *Eunuchus*, was never acted, his second, *Les Rieurs du Beau Richard*, a ballet, was played by his friends at Château-Thierry in 1659.

Between 1658 and 1661 he wrote *Clymène*, which recalls the love-songs of the old troubadours. It was not divided into scenes and was not intended to

be acted. It awakened a considerable amount of criticism. Geoffrey, in his "Cours de littérature dramatique," bracketed it with *Daphné*, *Astrée*, and *Galatée*, and condemned them all as the most insipid plays in the world. Voltaire was not much more lenient. On the other hand, Theodore de Banville called it a gem, a masterpiece, and enchanting, and more modern critics have followed his lead. Lafenestre, who said he could not refrain from thinking of Shakespeare when he read it, considered it to be the only work in the dramatic form which was worthy of the author, because without the freedom which came from disregarding the exigencies of the stage his style suffered.

In 1674 La Fontaine composed *Daphné* in compliance with a wish expressed by the musician Lulli, and this led to strained relations between the composer and the librettist. A quarrel between them seemed at first sight likely to prove a very unequal contest. But in the end the odd little man from nowhere emerged from the battle with most of the honours of war. Lulli's life was one long romance of adventure. Arriving one knows not whence, he became famous, and his name was coupled with those of the greatest literary men of seventeenth-century France—Molière, La Fontaine, Boileau, Benserade, Racine, Quinault, and Corneille. He was not a saint, but neither was he the human harpy he has sometimes been called. Quinault said that for the



JEAN BAPTISTE LULLI

twenty years he had known him he was at least a man of honour.

Born at Florence, November 29th, 1632, Lulli was eleven years younger than the poet. At the age of twelve he came to Paris—it was said in response to a demand made by Mademoiselle to her cousin, the Chevalier de Guise, for a young Florentine capable of improving her Italian conversation. At first he was her *garçon de la chambre*, and exercised his taste for music by composing little melodies for her balls, concerts, and serenades. When Mademoiselle was exiled to Saint-Fargeau after her brilliant display of military tactics at Orleans, Lulli found the country very dull, and looked about for a chance to improve his position. He had one great gift : he knew how to tell a funny story, and how to make comic gestures which sent his hearers into a hilarity which bordered on convulsions. Besides, his appearance was grotesque. Ready from the first to seize his opportunity, Lulli wrested fortune by following a daring impulse.

The story is told of him that when but a simple page-boy to Mademoiselle, he heard his mistress, who was walking in the gardens at Versailles, say to some friends who were in her company, "There is a bare pedestal on which they ought to place a statue." No sooner had the ladies passed, than Lulli, quick as thought, slipped off all his clothes, which he hid in the bushes, and jumping on to the pedestal took up a classical pose. When the Princess returned and saw

that her wish had apparently been granted instantaneously, she said, "A miracle has happened." Then the truth was discovered and it was suggested that Lulli should be punished, but Mademoiselle extended her pardon to him, and also pecuniary favours which became the basis of a large fortune.

From Mademoiselle he obtained at length his *cong  *, and, returning to Court, became after a few months composer of instrumental music to the King. In July 1662 he was known as Master of Music to the Royal Family; and being an excellent violinist, he soon directed a band called the "little violins," which rivalled in brilliancy the well-known "twenty-four violins." From that day his success was assured. He won the favour of Mme de Montespan as well as the King, and between 1664 and 1671 composed a number of ballets, collaborating with Moli  re. But this did not satisfy his ambition. He longed to write Grand Opera, a form of music which was then developing from chaos, or rather out of the combined poetry, dancing, and music set to scenes which formed the usual evening's entertainment.

Cambert, assisted by Perrin and Sourdeac, had founded "The Academies of the Opera." *Pomone*, performed in 1661, was a great success, to the surprise of Lulli, who had not believed that the public would care for a play which was sung from beginning to end. Against this partnership Lulli proceeded to institute a Royal Academy of Music, and, obtaining letters patent,

he started a theatre of his own where operas written with French verses were to be the order of the day. Between 1672 and 1687 Lulli composed eighteen operas.

In 1674 Quinault had composed *Alceste*, which had been set to music by the Florentine ; and some fragments had given enormous pleasure to Mme de Montespan, but it did not please everybody, and several of Quinault's enemies, Boileau amongst them, persuaded Lulli that his librettist was not good. In society he was advised to give up Quinault lest his own reputation should suffer. At Court Mme de Montespan and Mme de Thianges begged him to collaborate with La Fontaine instead. In the end he agreed to this suggestion, and La Fontaine wrote *Daphné*. Lulli said it was of no use to him. He regarded the lines as quite secondary and hoped the poet would subordinate them to the music. La Fontaine then endeavoured to improve his work according to the musician's wishes, but was not successful. Lulli said he wanted a tragedy, not a pastoral. Jokes were showered upon the unfortunate librettist. At Court they sang :

“ Ah ! que j'aime La Fontaine
D'avoir fait un opéra !
On verra finir ma peine
Aussitôt qu'on le jouera,
Par l'avis d'un fin critique
Je vais me mettre en boutique

Pour y vendre des sifflets
Je serai riche à jamais !”¹

Quinault was amenable enough. He was quite willing to have his finest passages cut about to fit the music, and Lulli, naturally enough, preferred the facile suppleness of the minor poet to the less accommodating lines of the better artist. A mysterious letter signed by one Perro—who may or may not have been Perrault—was written to Condé on September 13, 1674, in which the writer said, “La Fontaine has grown discouraged. He has abandoned his enterprise and left a clear field to Quinault.”

The fabulist was, however, not quite so passive in his behaviour as these remarks indicate. He took an active revenge against Lulli in October when he wrote “Le Florentin,” verses which must not be confused with the opera of the same name written in collaboration with Champmeslé.

“Le Florentin
Montre à la fin
Ce qu’il sait faire :

Il ressemble à ces loups qu’on nourrit et fait bien ;
Car un loup doit toujours garder son caractère,
Comme un mouton garde le sien.”

“I do not know,” remarked M. Romain Rolland,

¹ “Ah ! how I love La Fontaine for having written an opera. All my troubles will disappear as soon as it is played. On the advice of a clever critic I intend to open a shop for the sale of cat-calls. I shall be rich for ever afterwards.”

“whether Lulli was the wolf, but La Fontaine was certainly not the sheep. It would be imprudent to believe entirely in the malice to which in his wounded vanity he gave vent.”

He wrote an *épître* to Mme de Thianges on this affair at the beginning of 1675, which concluded :

“Retourner à Daphné vaut mieux que se venger ;
Je vous laisse d'ailleurs ma gloire à ménager :
Deux mots de votre bouche et belle et bien disante
Feront des merveilles pour moi ;
Vous êtes bonne et bien faisante,
Servez ma Muse auprès du Roi.”

No doubt the favourite's sister obtained the King's ear.

Lulli forgot and forgave the satire, but he did not set *Daphné* to music. The poet, having sulked for a while, wrote some more verses against the musician in 1680 :

“Je te souhaite un heur sans fin,
Qui soit exempt de toute peine ;
Mais surtout ami La Fontaine,
Dieu te garde du Florentin.”

At length he discovered how to protect himself against the offender, took comfort and grew reconciled to the inevitable, befriended Lulli and composed two charming dedications to Louis XIV. for him. These verses preceded the operas *Amadis* and *Roland*, both of them written by Quinault and played respectively in

1684 and 1685. The latter was particularly praised by the King.

La Fontaine had commenced *Galatée* about the same time as *Daphné* and both were printed, together with the poem "Quinquina," in 1682. *Galatée* was never finished. In a foreword the author explained his intentions with regard to it:

"I did not begin this dramatic poem with the purpose of making an opera of it that should have the ordinary accompaniments of spectacular and entertaining effects. I only wished to practise the art of writing comedy or tragedy, mingled with songs, which at that time seemed a pleasure to me. The inconstancy and anxiety which are natural to me hindered me from completing the three acts to which I wished to limit the subject. If satisfaction is found in reading the first two, perhaps I might decide to add a third."

Evidently he received no encouragement, for the third act remained unwritten. The completed portion promised to be an improvement on *Daphné*.

The opening verses, beginning

" Brillantes fleurs, naissez,
Herbe tendre, croissez
Le long de ces rivages ;
Venez, petits oiseaux,
Accorder vos ramages
Aux doux bruits de leurs eaux,

were set to music by Lambert, the king's musician.

After *Galatée* La Fontaine collaborated with Champmeslé in a series of plays, of which the first was *Ragotin*. Presented on April 21st, 1684, under the name of Champmeslé only, *Ragotin* was performed ten times, the last representation being on July 16th of that year. Furetière wrote very spitefully of the play in his second *factum*: "La Fontaine has been no more fortunate than Boyer and Leclerc when he wished to put a play on the stage; the actors dare not give a second representation for fear of being stoned." In his third *factum* he pretended to apologise for his statement, adding that he had said inadvertently the play was represented only once, whereas he had learned that there were two performances.

Ragotin was first printed in "Pièces de Théâtre de Monsieur de la Fontaine, 1702." The collaborators borrowed their idea from Scarron's *Roman Comique*, and some of the critics said they had completely spoiled the original. The work contains many inferior passages supposed to be from the pen of Champmeslé. This dramatist had written a play called *Le Florentin*, in two, three, or five acts, and this was reduced by La Fontaine to a single act and performed on July 23rd, 1685. J. B. Rousseau thought the praiseworthy portions should be attributed to Champmeslé; La Harpe was eulogistic, and Voltaire compared it favourably with some of Molière's short plays. The chief female character, Hortense, was acted in succession by Mlle Raisin, Mlle Grandval, and by

Adrienne Lecouvreur on the same evening that she was taken ill suddenly before her mysterious death.

To Champmeslé must be given the doubtful honour of dramatising two of La Fontaine's "Contes," "Les Oies de frère Philippe" and "La Coupe Enchantée," under the title of the latter. Although the stories are rather free, the play was not a breach of conventionality. It was first played at the Comédie Française on July 16th, 1688, and was presented there as recently as May 7th, 1886, and at the Trocadero the previous April on the occasion of the erection of a statue of the poet. Coquelin cadet appeared in the part of "Thibaut."

Another joint production was *Le Veau Perdu*, performed on August 22nd, 1689, but never printed because the manuscript—like the calf—was lost. The piece was entered in the Register as by Champmeslé, who had taken it chiefly from the "Contes," "Le Villageois qui cherche son Veau," and "La Servante justifiée."

La Fontaine took the idea of his opera *Astrée* from his favourite novel by d'Urfé, and it was played six times on and after November 28th, 1691. The evening before the first performance the Dauphin accompanied the Princesse de Conti to a dress rehearsal. The music was by Colasse, Lulli's pupil and son-in-law. Neither music nor libretto was strikingly successful. La Harpe reported a story which le Sage told originally about La Fontaine's attitude when he found his play but little to the public taste.

“The day on which the ballet of *Astrée*, by M. de la Fontaine, was performed for the first time,” runs the anecdote, “the famous poet left the theatre after the first act and betook himself to the Café Marion, where he fell asleep in a corner. While he lay oblivious to all around him a man of his acquaintance entered, and was so surprised to see him there that he could not help calling out, ‘What? M. de la Fontaine here? Ought he not to be present at the first performance of his *Astrée*?’ At these words the author rose, stretched and yawned, replying, ‘I came away. I saw the first act, which bored me so much that I did not wish to hear any more. I must say I admire the patience of the Parisians.’”

This phrase does not seem natural to the poet. He would not have concerned himself about other people, and he was anxious about the play on his own account, to judge from a letter he wrote to Mesdames d'Hervart, de Viriville, and de Gouvernet, in which he said “to remain quietly at Bois-le-Vicomte while they are rehearsing my opera at Paris is more than could be expected of any author, however sensible he might be.”

Besides *Achille*, a weak fragment, containing some verses that are fine tragedy, which was never completed, probably because Maucroix advised its discontinuation, one more play is attributed to La Fontaine, and was printed in “Pièces de Théâtre de M. de la Fontaine, 1702,” and again in 1729. *Je vous*

prends sans verd was first played on May 1st, 1693, after the poet's conversion. It seems to have been mostly the work of Champmeslé, or was perhaps written without La Fontaine's help, in spite of the fact that it appeared in his name.

In his choice of a collaborator La Fontaine was not particularly happy, and it is doubtful whether the attempt at joint production was an advantage for Champmeslé. Some of the latter's comedies have been described as containing clever situations and good dialogue, but he was probably happier on the stage than in dramatic work. La Fontaine's literary connection with him is of less importance in the poet's career than a friendship with his wife, the famous actress La Champmeslé,¹ to whom "*Belphégor*" was dedicated.

She was not a great beauty, but her powers of fascination were indisputable. Mme de Sévigné said that she was ugly close to and only adorable when she began to act. Some thought her skin was lacking in clearness and that her eyes were too small and too round, but all agreed that she had a fine figure and

¹ This lady was the centre of a little theatrical circle. Born in February 1642, she was the daughter of Guillaume Desmares, and in 1665 married Charles Chevillet, Sieur de Champmeslé, the stout son of a small shopkeeper. This name—Racine spelt it Chamellay or Chameslé, La Fontaine Chanmeslay, and others Champellé—she made famous. For some years husband and wife played in the provinces, but in 1669 they appeared in Paris. The former's talents are easily summed up. He played the part of a king with majesty and distinction.

held herself beautifully. Her portrait is coquettish. She knew how to use her voice, and its inflexions were so natural that it seemed as though the passion which trembled on her lips must necessarily come from her heart.

Laroque, who was a bad actor but a good critic, saw that she had a future before her. A friendship with Racine, which was to become something warmer than mere friendship, brought her into prominence. There are many different accounts of this relationship between dramatist and interpreter. Desœuillets, who had played the rôle of Hermione, fell ill, and La Champmeslé's ambition was to fill her place. At first the author did not wish to give her this opportunity, not seeing how she could play so difficult a part satisfactorily. Apparently, however, her performance was a triumph. Mme de Sévigné thought that she put La Desœuillets utterly in the shade. According to one account, after the play was over Racine ran to her lodgings, and went down on his knees to thank her. According to another, she owed her fame to him because he taught her exactly how to use her voice. Louis Racine, who wished it to be understood that his father had been nothing more to the actress than her teacher, said that he explained and repeated every line of her parts.

As a proof of her lack of intelligence it was said that when she asked Racine whence he had derived *Athalie*, and he informed her it was taken from the

Old Testament, she replied artlessly, "From the Old Testament; but have not I heard some one speak of a new one?" At least she was teachable.

In 1670 she made a great success in *Berenice*. As Atalide in *Bajazet* she was superb. Boileau admired her Iphigenia. He wrote :

"Jamais Iphigénie, en Aulide immolée,
N'a coûté tant de pleurs à la Grèce assemblée
Que dans l'heureux spectacle à nos yeux étalé
En a fait sous son nom verser la Champmeslé."¹

Racine was inspired by the actress, and Mme de Sévigné declared a little unfairly that his plays were written for La Champmeslé and not for future generations. She believed that when his youth fled, and he ceased to love, his vogue would die out. Mme de Sévigné had reasons for not approving of the lady on whom Racine had bestowed his affections. In 1671 her son, whose follies were a great grief to her, was entangled with La Champmeslé and Ninon de Lenclos. Tears and recriminations were the result.

La Champmeslé received at her house "all the people of distinction who were known at Court or in the town," as well as the most celebrated authors of the day. Mme de Sévigné described these "delicious supper-parties" as "diableries," and she knew

¹ "When Iphigenia was sacrificed in Aulis, she could not draw from all Greece as many tears as have been shed over La Champmeslé representing her in the charming spectacle displayed before our eyes."

her son frequented them. So did La Fontaine. So of course did Racine and Boileau. Others were Chapelle, Valincour, and the Comte de Revel. The Sieur de Champmeslé sat at his own table and collaborated with La Fontaine. His rôle was to be complacent. There is a well-known epigram, written by Boileau, which referred to "six amants contents et non jaloux" and was said by J. B. Rousseau to reflect on Racine's treatment of Champmeslé.

All this happened in 1670 and 1671, and for a long time Racine was the favoured one in this *ménage à plusieurs*. The depth of his passion, it is said, is indicated by the fact that his letters break off from the close of 1665 until 1676. It is supposed his correspondence was destroyed in order that the affair might remain hidden from the eyes of the world. There is a letter from La Fontaine written to La Champmeslé from Château-Thierry on December 12th, 1675, in which reference is made to the younger poet :

"I am at Chaury, mademoiselle ; imagine whether I can help thinking of you, I who would never forget you even in the midst of the most brilliant Court. M. Racine promised to write to me ; why has he not done so ? He would without doubt have spoken of you, loving no one so much as your charming self ; and this would have been the greatest relief to the grief I experience in no longer seeing you. If he knew that I had to some degree followed the

advice he gave me, without however ceasing to be faithful to idleness and sleep, he would perhaps in sheer gratitude have sent me news of you and of himself; but truthfully I excuse him. The charms of your society fill the hearts of your friends so completely that all other ideas are forgotten.

“How right you were, mademoiselle, to say that boredom would overwhelm me before I had lost sight of the church towers of the big village. It was so true that I am now in a state of melancholy which I feel sure will never be dissipated until I return to Paris :

“A guérir un atrabilaire,
Oui, Champmeslé saura mieux faire
Que de Fagon tout le talent ;
Pour moi, j'ose affirmer d'avance
Qu'un seul instant de sa présence
Peut me guérir incontinent.”¹

“Woods, fields, streams, and meadow-nymphs move me no longer, for happiness is in being by your side ; so I am reckoning on taking an early departure. Nevertheless I busy myself so little with my affairs that I do not know when they will be finished. Accounts, sales, and bargains are things that disgust me. To speak your language is far more in my line. But do not imagine that I claim to be able to speak as well as you. That would be impossible,

¹ “La Champmeslé knows how to cure a fit of melancholy better than Dr. Fagon with all his talents. As for me, I confess at once that a single instant in her presence would give me immediate health.”

and it would be as much as my life were worth to attempt it.

“Please make M. Racine write to me. You will do a good deed. I will reply to him. I hope that he will speak of your triumphs, in which case I am quite sure he will not lack material. I flatter myself he will also write that you think of me. I assure you that this will be the most pleasant news for me to hear, and that you will never find a servant more faithful or more devoted than La Fontaine.”

Another letter, written three years later, contains the names of two new adorers, La Fare and de Tonnerre. The great passion was burnt out, Racine had disappeared from La Champmeslé's horizon. A close intimacy is revealed in the tone of the poet's phrases, but it is not he who is the happy lover :

“WRITTEN IN THE COUNTRY, 1678.

“As you are the best friend in the world as well as the most charming, and because you take great interest in what concerns your friends, it is only fair to inform you what those who did not follow you are doing. They drink from morning to evening, water, wine, lemonade, etc. ; light refreshments for those who are deprived of seeing you. The heat and your absence have thrown us all into unbearable languor. As for you, mademoiselle, I have no need to be told what you are doing. You are fascinating from morn till night and heaping hearts on hearts.

All will soon belong to the King of France and to Mlle de Champmeslé. But what are your courtiers doing? As for those of the King, I am not at all troubled about them. Are you charming away boredom, bad fortune at cards, and all M. de la Fare's other misfortunes? And M. de Tonnerre, does he always carry home with him some small winnings? He should no longer know how to win large sums after acquiring your good graces. All the rest must be an addition of very little importance, and whoever has won you should find but indifferent enjoyment in all other favours of fortune."

A quatrain is in existence which referred in a humorous manner to this change of lovers :

"A la plus tendre amour elle fut destinée
Qui prit longtemps Racine dans son cœur ;
Mais pas un insigne malheur,
Le Tonnerre est venu qui l'a deRacinée."

Whether the indifference between Racine and La Champmeslé was the outcome of fires grown cold, or of a quarrel, or whether the strength of the poet's passion had been overrated, will probably never be known. At her death his remarks expressed nothing that throws a light on this point. He wrote in the most ordinary manner that "*en passant*, he owed reparation to her memory, and that she died very repentant of her past."

The breach in her relations with Racine does

not appear to have caused la Fontaine much grief, but when Mme de la Sablière suffered because La Fare left her side to join the court of La Champmeslé he was full of sympathy. This affair was brought home to him, for in 1672 he had become an inmate of Mme de la Sablière's house. The passions of his friends interested him the more because he had not an absorbing one of his own.

CHAPTER XI

MME DE LA SABLIERE

LOVE in a lasting form did not enter into La Fontaine's life. Having missed the path to domestic happiness, the poet frittered away his affections upon many women. He was led astray by a fair face, a neat ankle, and a blushing cheek. Not one of these women wielded a permanent fascination over him. He loved them all—for a time. His lower nature was fickle, but his higher self was faithful. Many men have been like him in this respect. His capacity for friendship was great, but it must be confessed that his feelings depended to some extent on the generosity of the friend. As long as he was loved and served he remained true.

His friendship for the Duchesse de Bouillon was warmer and more full of poetry, that for Mme de la Sablière the finer and more satisfying. The former had given him a place in the world, the Court, and society; the latter gave him a place by her fireside, and that was better still. La Fontaine loved and needed a sheltering ingle-nook,

a spot where he could be fed and where he could rest and sleep at any time that he desired. There it is easy to picture him in the full vigour of his manhood, become almost a part of the familiar room. He wore his oldest clothes, he lounged or sprawled inelegantly, he scribbled verses on odd scraps of paper or hummed the airs of the latest opera. Sometimes he chatted imaginative nonsense to his gracious hostess, sometimes he talked to her of the really serious things of life. When she went out he dozed or idled; when she returned he brightened up and greeted her as though he were her child and she his mother.

Once, if the story may be believed, she found him sitting barefooted, painfully attempting to darn a sock that had no heel left to it. In her surprise she was tongue-tied at first, then falteringly said, "I am so sorry; I would have done that for you, but I cannot darn."

"Do not distress yourself, madame, I pray," he answered courteously; "there is no need."

He repaid her devotion with equal devotion; her kindness evoked some of his finest verses, and her griefs were the object of his sincerest sympathy.

At first sight it would seem an undertaking of no little magnitude to offer a permanent home to an erratic man of letters who required much care, patience, and untiring forbearance. There is responsibility in taking charge of a great baby who

is also a great genius. But in the case of Mme de la Sablière the risk was reduced to a minimum, the honour swelled to its maximum proportions. Her dwelling was a huge hôtel with rooms that could never all be filled, her table was loaded with dishes that could never all be emptied before they were removed, her servants were so numerous that a guest more or less among the many made not the slightest difference. She kept open house, and the distinction between visitor and inmate was so slight that in more than one case it vanished entirely.

There was another side to the question. In seventeenth-century France a hard-and-fast line was drawn between the nobility and the financier class. Mme de la Sablière belonged to the latter. Her husband was the son of the great Rambouillet who had built up an enormous fortune and knew how to make a royal show with it. The men of her father's family, too, were men of business. But in Mme de la Sablière and her husband intellectual and literary tastes predominated over the commercial element. The latter wrote poetry, the former studied Descartes and other philosophers and wrote Christian maxims similar in character to those of La Rochefoucauld. Both husband and wife desired to entertain the most interesting and the most cultured people.

For this it was impossible to confine themselves to their own sphere. Mme de la Sablière by her charm, her beauty, her intelligence, her unassum-

ing manner, and her discriminating hospitality was able to cross the rubicon, and the *habitués* of her salon included many who might have refused to enter more exclusive houses. Therefore La Fontaine, who by virtue of his growing literary reputation had the *entrée* to the drawing-rooms of duchesses and even royalty, was in his way an asset. He had desirable literary friends as well as friends of rank; and although Mme de la Sablière was far too good-hearted and disinterested to count these things as advantages in doing a kindness to the helpless poet, it is probable that she lost nothing by her generous act.

Her poet came to her on the death of his patroness the Dowager-Madame, in April 1672, and he lived in her house for twenty years, even after she had left it herself. Some of her last thoughts in this world were for his comfort and the welfare of his soul.

Born in 1630, Marguerite Hessein was nine years the poet's junior. In 1654, when he was busy translating the "Eunuchus," she made a marriage of convenience with Antoine de Rambouillet de la Sablière, who was in love with another woman. De la Sablière believed that he would be able to cure a hopeless passion if he bestowed less warm affections upon the charming girl who was to be his wife. But though he appreciated her good qualities, and never failed in respect and esteem for her, she was unable to inspire him with a great love, and the feelings which had wandered to another quarter were never recalled.

It was a dangerous situation, and one which led to an arrangement then frequently in vogue—while the husband went his own way, he encouraged the wife to follow his example.

All that wealth could give them this couple possessed. Antoine had various official posts. He was *conseiller du roi et des finances*, registrar of Crown lands, and rich enough to lend princes fabulous sums. His father, Nicolas de Rambouillet, was a character in his way. Tallemant des Réaux, whose mother was Rambouillet's sister, knew something of the family. He described his uncle as "the sort of man who only loves himself and never refuses himself anything. . . . He is vain and frankly parvenu. When he made the garden outside the Porte de Saint-Antoine which was called Rambouillet, his associates spoke freely about it, for they could not discover what profit they would make on his purchase of five large farms. He wrote them that it was necessary for him to have some amusement, and he expected that his partners would be willing enough to contribute to the cost of a garden which would bring health to the one person essential to their projects. What buffoonery that was!"

The house in question, known, for reasons not far to seek, as the Folie-Rambouillet, was situated in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine on the road to Vincennes. Its real name was the House of Four Pavilions, and it was a magnificent country seat, containing fine apartments and beautiful furniture. The broad terraces,

magnificent pastures, lawns, fountains, and streams were laid out in the most picturesque fashion on the banks of the Seine.

Mme de la Sablière for the most part left this residence to her husband and his friends (among whom may be counted Mlle Van Ghannel, his mistress), whilst she preferred to live in her hôtel in the Rue Saint-Honoré and gather round her the people she liked best.

There were three children of the marriage—a son, Nicolas, born in 1655, and two daughters, Anne and Marguerite, but they interfered very little in the scheme of life which their mother had mapped out for herself. That scheme was an ambitious one. She wished to be a woman of learning without gaining the title of a bluestocking. She succeeded where Mlle de Scudéry, Mme Dacier, and Mme du Châtelet failed. She knew her Horace and her Virgil, Corbinelli praised her knowledge of Homer, and she had learnt mathematics, physics, astronomy under Sauveur and Roberval, both members of the Academy of Sciences. She did not despise the “ologies,” and she belonged to a group of freethinkers who sifted all the religious theories and yet did not trumpet their agnosticism aloud.

One of her greatest friends was Bernier, the philosopher, a pupil of Gassendi. He was one year older than La Fontaine, and had worked his way from an obscure origin to become a Doctor of Medicine. A great traveller, he had visited North Germany, Poland, and Switzerland in his youth, then Palestine and Syria,

whence he had returned to find his beloved tutor on his deathbed. In 1656, a few months after Gassendi passed away in his arms, Bernier set out again on his travels, visiting Egypt and then India. His experiences in the East became the subject of his book "*Les Voyages contenant des états du Grand Mogol, la description de l'Hindoustan, etc.*" He returned to France in 1668 ; and taking up his abode in Mme de la Sablière's hôtel, taught her natural history, anatomy, and philosophy. For her he abridged the works of Gassendi, and no doubt she attempted to rule her life by his precepts on happiness, virtue, and liberty. Some of his ideas may be gathered from a letter which Saint-Evremond sent to Ninon.

"Monsieur Bernier,"¹ he wrote in 1698, "who was

¹ An interesting document which throws an odd light on their relations is a letter sent to Mme de la Sablière by Bernier from Montpellier, January 7th, 1688. After a description of his travels and the country through which he passed, he wrote, much in the vein in which La Fontaine addressed his wife from Limousin :

"The beauty of women, as I have noticed it, is not less important. It is true that lovely and ugly women are to be found everywhere. I have seen some very beautiful ones in Egypt who made me think of the lovely and famous Cleopatra. I have also seen some very lovely among the blacks of Africa, who have not had the thick lips and flattened noses peculiar to the people. Seven or eight amongst others that I have come across in various parts were of so surprising a beauty that they effaced, in my opinion, the Venus of the Farnese Palace at Rome. This aquiline nose, this small mouth with coral lips and ivory teeth, these large and keen eyes, this gentleness of expression, this bosom and their other charms were of the highest perfection. At Moka I saw some quite nude who were for sale, and I may say that there is nothing finer to be seen in the world, but they were very dear, for they wished to sell them for three times the price of the others.

"I have also seen very beautiful women in the Indies, and one can

the prettiest philosopher I ever knew (pretty philosopher is not a common expression, but his make, his stature, his manner, and his conversation gave him a just title to that epithet)—Monsieur Bernier, I say, speaking of the mortification of the senses, said to me one day, ‘I will entrust you with a secret, with which I would not entrust Mme de la Sablière nor even Mlle de Lenclos, whom I take to be of a superior kind. I’ll tell it you as a secret, “that abstinence from pleasure appears to me a great sin.”’ I was surprised with the novelty of the system; it left, however, some impression upon me.”

With Bernier to teach her moral lessons and describe many things under the sun to her, with La Fontaine to feast her mind on poetry, with Sauveur’s geometri-

call them lovely brunettes. There are some amongst the rest who are of a yellow tinge, which is much admired, but which I do not find quite to my taste, as the yellow is bright and startling, not the pallor of jaundice. Imagine a young and charming French girl who is beginning to have jaundice, and in place of her unhealthy complexion, yellowish eyes which look weary, give her a healthy, pleasant, laughing face, and eyes that shine and cast looks of love. That is the best idea I can give you.”

He then proceeds to describe other Indian races, Persian and Turkish women, and at the close of his letter adds an epitaph to poor Chapelle, which he wishes her to show to La Fontaine, whom he describes as the king of poetry.

“Here lies the celebrated Chapelle, the amiable philosopher who inspired wit and joy throughout the world. Nature never produced a keener imagination, an intellect more penetrating, more refined, more delicate, more agreeable. The Muses and the Graces never abandoned him.” Chapelle died in 1686.

At the close of his letter he appeals to her scientific tastes, and describes some experiments in vivisection, writing about diseases of dogs and horses. Altogether a strange medley.

cal problems to sharpen her wits, with various others to show her the use of the microscope, the telescope, and the dissecting knife, Mme de la Sablière had but little time, one would imagine, for vain repinings or frivolous amusements, since her earnestness was such that she could not bear to leave her studies until she had mastered whatever her curiosity had led her to investigate. But this is where her versatility stood her in good stead.

La Fontaine disliked pedantic women, and La Fontaine's taste was that of the majority. Therefore Mme de la Sablière dissembled her learning, and having closed her study door, opened that of her drawing-room with the air of a woman who has no other tastes in life than for entertaining, culture, poetry, art, and gaiety. Her suppers were superb. Far and wide their reputation spread. It was a favour to be admitted there.

Mademoiselle complained because many fine gentlemen preferred to go there instead of to more exalted places—meaning her own salon. Among the courtiers of whom Mme de la Sablière depleted the Court was Lauzun; and Mademoiselle, who had cast a favourable eye in his direction, was not likely to regard his defection with equanimity. Wishing to know how Lauzun spent his time when away from her, she addressed herself to Rochefort, who also frequented the hôtel in the Rue Saint-Honoré. Rochefort said that he did not think Lauzun was carrying on any affair of

the heart, that he was retired in his habits and saw but few women ; but that he sometimes went to see a little lady of the town called Mme de la Sablière, and he described her, in order to set Mademoiselle's mind at rest, as a *paysanne à belle passion* who had no good looks at all. Moreover he assured her that Lauzun did not go to the house to pay court to his hostess, but that he owed her some debt of gratitude ; and with the intention of repaying it in part, he had bestowed upon her brother the post of *secrétaire des dragons*.

The great Condé, who had had financial dealings with M. de la Sablière, was another guest as well as the Duc de Foix, Brancas, and Chaulieu. Sobieski visited her when he was in Paris, before he became King of Poland.

Mme de la Sablière was very popular and pleased every one, but she had a passage at arms with Boileau, who depicted her in his "Satire sur les Femmes" :

" Cette savante

Qu'estime Roberval et Sauveur fréquente.

D'où vient qu'elle a l'œil trouble et le teint si terni ?

C'est que sur le calcul, dit-on, de Cassini,

Un astrolabe en main, elle a dans sa gouttière

A suivre Jupiter passé la nuit entière."

Mme de la Sablière had criticised his lines :

" Que l'astrolabe en main, un autre aille chercher.

Si le soleil est fixe et tourne sur son axe,

Si Saturne à ses yeux peut faire un parallaxe."

She thought he ought to have had a better knowledge of the course of the planets and the use of the astrolabe. Being corrected like a schoolboy and by a woman, the satirist made the obvious retort that the study of astronomy would take the lustre from her eyes and the roses from her complexion. La Fontaine was far more considerate. He wished to shield her from all suspicion of being a learned woman, and addressed her in his verses, as we have seen, as though she were ignorant of the Cartesian philosophy.

Perrault agreed with La Fontaine that she was never ostentatious and that her cleverness in hiding her gifts was to be esteemed hardly less than the advantages she possessed. Many of her friends were of the idle, pleasure-loving class that never spent an hour in study in their lives. Among them were Ninon de Lenclos, Chaulieu, one of the gay Abbés who were so much in fashion at that date, his double and friend the idler La Fare, who played a tragic part in her life, Charles de Sévigné, Saint-Evremond, and many others of a certain set who never had a reputation for being serious.

Her faults, for faults she had, lay in being too fond of her independence and in caring too little what people said or thought of her. She had a great mind and a great soul, as the future was to prove, but she had also strong and ungoverned passions.

Whilst her husband was making little verses to many ladies—he called them Iris, Cloris, Cleonice,

Clarice, and Phyllis—she was lavishing her whole heart on the handsome and adventuresome Marquis de la Fare. Born of an illustrious family of Languedoc, and fourteen years younger than Mme de la Sablière, he seemed at first sight to be the favourite of the gods. He was a fine soldier and a poet, full of brilliant qualities and endowed with earthly possessions, but at the same time with a vicious weakness which brought about his undoing.¹ His first passion was for the Marquise de Rochefort, but this was but an evanescent love affair. He was devoted to Mme de Coulanges, but he left her for one who returned his passion more frankly, Mme de la Sablière, and having won all that she had to give, he turned to other interests.

With La Fare as a lover, and La Fontaine as a friend, Mme de la Sablière might have consoled herself for her husband's infidelities. But her restless soul and passionate heart were not to find solace in either companionship, and La Fontaine was compelled to become a mere spectator of a feverish love affair, in which he was obliged to look on at Mme de la Sablière's anguish without any opportunity of lessening it. Simple, upright, and sensible as she was known to be, an inexplicable attraction bound her to a man who had more beauties of physique than of character.

¹ Chaulieu said of him: "He was a man who joined to much simple and natural wit all that could please in society, filled above all with a lovable gentleness and facility of manners which gave to him plenary indulgence whatever he did . . . it would be difficult to discover another with such amiable qualities and powers of pleasing."

His powers of fascination lay in his external appearance rather than in his temperament, for he had good features, a fine moustache, white hands which he kept carefully, and a taste for cards and dissipation of every kind.

Perhaps he was the first to fall in love, and, being accustomed to receive all he desired, persisted in pressing his suit until she was moved by his ardour. Perhaps, like the poet Saint-Lambert, he was not averse to be wooed, and liked to be the object of a charming woman's adoration. At all events the warmth of his passion was extreme, whilst she remained seemingly cold and unyielding. At length he obtained the response from her that he looked for, and for some years they were constant lovers and the sport of an inconstant world.

"They will put you in the place of the dove as a symbol of fidelity," said his cynical friend Chaulieu to La Fare.

While it lasted La Fare did not hesitate to advertise his passion. In the spring of 1677 he quitted the service, giving to Louvois as a reason for this step the fact that the latter had refused him a merited advance, added to the bad state of his affairs, to his idleness, and to his love for a woman who well deserved it.

But before long disillusion came to both. He was essentially an idler, and to the idler mischief is always at hand. Gambling led to his undoing. She prayed

him to have more restraint. He swore twenty times a day that he would never risk another pistole, and twenty times he broke his vow. She had to suffer from his bad excuses, his attempts at justification, his impatience to be gone from her presence, and the certainty that she was losing him. Speculation as to the cause of the breach was rife. La Fontaine had seen what was coming and must have warned her, but others were not so astute. Some blamed her fickleness. Charles de Sévigné knew better, and his mother wrote on August 4th, 1677, to Mme de Grignan, "I remember my son once made this answer to a person who censured the fair Sablière for inconstancy. 'No, no, she still loves her dear Philadelphus. It is true, indeed, that, to make their love more lasting, they do not see one another so long as they did formerly, and instead of twelve hours he now does not pass above seven or eight at a time in her company ; but tenderness, passion, kindness, and true fidelity are still in possession of the fair one's heart, and whoever says the contrary says an untruth.' "

Ninon de Lenclos had more experience in such cases. She came near the truth when she said : "I am more sorry to see M. de la Fare give himself up to bassette than I should be if he carried on thirty ordinary infidelities. You would triumph over his mistresses, because he would never love any one like you, and, whatever they might do, he would always come back to you. But the Queen

of Spades!¹ Ah, my beautiful one, your charms, your passion, all will split upon that rock. I pity you with all my heart."

Mme de la Sablière, finding herself helpless against so attractive a rival, with many tears and pleadings, concluded that something must be done.

Mme de Sévigné became aware of her determination early in November 1679, and wrote to her daughter on the 8th :

"Mme de la Sablière has certainly taken the resolution you approve of : let us break off the sad remains ! . . . But Mme de Coulanges maintains that La Fare was never in love ; it was nothing but laziness, laziness, mere laziness ! and la Bassette has given proof that all he wanted at Mme de la Sablière's was only to meet good company."²

By June of 1680 the lovers had parted for ever. Mme de la Sablière had withdrawn from society.

¹ Bassette was a dangerous pursuit. Mme de Sévigné said it "is something indescribable. One can easily lose a hundred thousand pistoles in an evening." Mme de Montespan once lost four millions at the game at one sitting, and it was said she compelled the bankers to go on playing until she had won it all back again. In time the game was suppressed by law.

² Early in the following year she referred again to Mme de Coulanges, who could not altogether hide the annoyance she felt at her admirer's defection. Writing of Caderousse Mme de Sévigné declared : "I am as inveterate against him as Mme de Coulanges is against La Fare. She never now takes any notice of him, and tells the world, in plain terms, he has deceived her. She is the only one alive who is sorry for it. La Sablière has taken his part like a pretty and spirited personage. My hatred to Caderousse is far from springing from the same source, as you may perceive ; for he has never deceived me."



MME DE LA SABLIERE

La Fontaine, who would no doubt have prevented this step had he been able to do so, could only assure her of his silent sympathy. Not a line exists in which he refers to Mme de la Sablière's unfortunate experience. He was probably not without good advice to offer her, for at counselling others he was far cleverer than in following the best of precepts; but he had never loved so disastrously as this, and he may have felt the case to be beyond him. Perhaps, too, Mme de la Sablière, knowing his tenderness, refrained from confiding everything to him to save him pain on her account. She was very self-reliant, as her letters show.

It is not by La Fontaine, then, that any light is thrown on this tragic love affair which affected him so closely, but Mme de Sévigné's letters give a characteristic and full account of the manner in which this extraordinary woman took the blow to her pride and affections which had been ruthlessly dealt her.

"Madame de la Sablière in her *Incurables* is perfectly cured of one disorder which was for a long time thought incurable," wrote Mme de Sévigné on June 21st, 1680—"a cure which brings with it more real satisfaction than any other would have done. She is at present in a very happy state of mind; is religious, truly so, and makes a proper use of her free will. But is it not God who has wrought this change in her heart? Is it not

God who has given her this will? Is it not God who has delivered her from the power of the demon? Is it not God who has caused her to walk, and has directed her footsteps in the right way? Is it not God who has inspired her with a desire to be wholly His? The work is completed. God has thus crowned with success the gifts He has been pleased to impart. If this is what you call free will, Heaven, in its mercy, make me a partaker of it."

But Mme de Grignan was not satisfied. She wanted to know all that had passed between the lovers. Her mother did her best to satisfy this curiosity, and wrote on July 14th :

"You asked me what had dissolved the connection between La Fare and Mme de la Sablière? It was *bassette*? Would you have thought it? Yes, his infidelity declared itself under that habit. It was for that courtesan, *bassette*, that he laid aside his religious adoration. The moment had come when that bright flame of passion was to cease and be transferred to another object: but who would have supposed that the road to heaven lay in *bassette*? It has been said, with truth, that numberless are the ways that lead to that point. Mme de la Sablière at first imputed his want of attention to several different causes; she carefully examined his frivolous excuses, his false reasons, his pretences, his confused justifications, his strained conversations,

his impatience to quit her company, his frequent trips to Saint-Germain for play, his yawns, his lack of anything to say ; and at length, after having well observed the eclipse of love, and the foreign body that by degrees darkened the lustre of a flame which once shone so bright, she came to a resolution.

“What it may have cost her I know not ; but without quarrelling with him, without reproaching him, without the least noise, without forbidding him the house, without any explanation, without endeavouring to put him to the blush, she all at once eclipsed herself ; and without giving up the house, to which she still returns occasionally, or making any declaration that she has renounced the world, she finds herself so happily situated at the Incurables that she passes almost all her time there, rejoicing in her heart at the discovery that her malady is not like those of the unhappy objects on whom she attends. The superiors of the house are charmed with her understanding. She governs them all. Her friends who go to visit her always find her entertaining. La Fare still plays at bassette.

“And the battle ended for want of combatants.

“Thus was concluded this grand affair, which drew everybody’s attention. Such is the road which God has been pleased to point out to this lovely woman. She did not stand still with her arms folded and

say, 'I await the grace of God.' Good heavens! How such reasoning wearies me! *Mort de ma vie!* Grace knows how to open every road, every turning and winding, bassette, ugliness, pride, disappointment, misfortunes, exaltations, or depressions. All these serve as an instrument in the hands of this all-powerful workman, who accomplishes infallibly whatever he sets out to do. As I hope you will not have my letters printed, I shall not make use of the artifice of our reverend brothers to make them go down."

This lively account, by a woman whose descriptive powers were as forcible as her imagination was vivid, did not specify all the causes which had brought about the final rupture between the lovers. La Fare had found a less exacting mistress to whom he transferred his allegiance. He loved Mlle Champmeslé, in whose train young de Sévigné, M. de Tonnerre, and many others were already established.

The new infidelity broke Mme de la Sablière's heart. Her world indeed seemed falling to pieces. Her daughters were both married. Her husband died, struck by a fever brought on by worry at the sudden death of his mistress. Her son, to her grief, changed his religion. Bernier was away on distant travels. La Fontaine of all her intimate friends and relatives seemed to be the only one left to her. Desperate, forsaken, and lonely, she felt that nothing was any longer worth while.

Her decision to withdraw into the Hospice des Incurables and devote the remainder of her life to good works was irrevocable. She did not give up her hôtel in the Rue Saint-Honoré, but insisted that the poet should remain as much at home as ever there, and the table was laid for him at every meal as usual. But she dismissed most of her people, and is quoted as having said: "I have only kept my three pets by me—my dog, my cat, and La Fontaine."

Mme de Sévigné depicted to some degree the mental struggles through which this erring woman went through before her withdrawal from the world. But certain letters written to her Confessor, the Abbé de Rancé,¹ after her conversion, throw a personal light on a woman of whom little is known at first hand, and make clear her spiritual awakening. They are full of gratitude and affection for the Abbé. Extracts from some of these letters were published by M. Anatole France in "*La Vie Littéraire*."

On March 14th, 1687, she wrote to Rancé to complain of the confessor he had appointed to represent him, and who instead of calming her appeared to have an agitating effect: "I made a general confession to him," she said, "and thought I should

¹ Armand-Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé was then between fifty and sixty years of age, and had been in retreat for many years, having entered La Trappe in 1662. His experiences in the world included a love affair with Mme de Montbazou which had led to a scandal. He had written maxims for Anne de Gonzague, Princess Palatine, and he drew up rules of conduct for his new convert.

die at his feet. For a long time afterwards I was without strength to look him in the face, and only approached him with an emotion which I cannot well describe. . . . I dare not tell him of this state, although I have said something about it, lest it should pain him. But I throw myself upon your charity, which I have found to be unbounded. I feel that a word from you would calm me, because it would give me rest as though it came from God Himself. The respect I feel for you, and the effect it has had upon me, make me believe without a doubt that I owe my salvation to you."

The truth was that her confessor urged her to break with the world only little by little, and not to shut herself up entirely in the quiet hospital in the Luxembourg with the people who were suffering from terrible and incurable diseases. He advised her not to give up her hôtel in town without due forethought. This subject she discussed in a letter to Rancé dated 1688 :

"I have desired for a long while to leave my house in the Rue Saint-Honoré. But because the individual into whose care you have committed me permits me to remain, and indeed rather approves of it, I have come to look upon the matter with an indifference which makes me believe I shall never move from the spot. All of a sudden, however, people have been found to take over my lease at Easter. Therefore I am left with no other house besides this and a small

one in which I shall lodge the few servants I have left."

She proceeded to describe the feelings with which all this domestic rearrangement and retrenchment inspired her. She left nothing in the world that she regretted. "Nevertheless," she wrote, "I find myself in a kind of solitude and abandonment which frightens me. When I wake up in the night I am seized with palpitations of the heart, for no other reason than that I seem to be alone in the world. And in this state I think of you and of your house, of which I only envy the happiness because I see those who dwell in it have obtained peace. . . . It is certain that in my whole life I have never wished to belong to God so fiercely. All that I see and hear regarding this century—in spite of myself, for I never inquire about the outside world—makes me wish to be in a desert."

On April 1st, 1689, she wrote again about the inmates of her household, using the word *domestiques*, which did not mean only servants, but all who dwelt in the house—intendants, secretaries, clerks, etc.; and in the term she probably included La Fontaine :

"With regard to my people, I try, by gentleness and by a conduct quite different to the bad example I set them formerly, to make them acknowledge their duty towards God. As for speaking openly to them, I am too unfit, and my past life comes back to mind

too clearly for me to be the first to cast blame. . . . However, there is no positive irregularity."

In another letter her extreme hypersensitiveness became apparent. Having lost her confessor by death, the priest appointed by Rancé in his place caused her even deeper mortification than the former one. Yet she felt that she must bear it for the good of her soul. The trouble arose because the confessor did not believe that she had a vocation for the religious life, and thought that she would fail to win salvation in her retreat. He went so far as to write to her and tell her he regarded her soul as lost. She replied to him, as she had been counselled by Rancé, "that if there should be any want of perfection in the divorce I have suffered from the world, I hope that God will not impute it to me." All this struggle she laid bare: "I have recourse to your charity, my very reverend father, in order to beg you to assist me. You alone can do so. I feel this to a degree which you cannot realise, but God knows it."

Rancé encouraged her to retire definitely, and she finally withdrew into the Incurables, retaining only a single servant to wait upon her.

The years passed, and she worked earnestly and with sincerity among the sick and suffering, until she found that she too had contracted a dread disease which was to carry her to the grave. For a time she kept this awful knowledge secret, but in July 1692

she found it necessary to divulge it to her friend and spiritual adviser. Even then she thought first of him : "I did not wish to tell you a thing which I was fully persuaded would pain you," she wrote, "and I have still a mind to leave you in ignorance of it." At the same time she begged him to respect her confidence. She had told no one but the house-surgeon, who had warned her of the danger she was in.

She had been living chiefly on eggs and milk, a form of diet advised by Rancé, which was apparently the best one she could have chosen for her complaint : "I tell you this to mitigate the grief you will feel," she added. "Those in the world do not know what I have told you, with the exception of the one I have mentioned. I do not think you will disapprove of my conduct in this matter. You will understand that I should have to make useless explanations. . . . If I need never again see those of this world my condition would be a real paradise. As long as I lived in the world I always feared this disease with all the horror nature has given us.

"Since my conversion I have not thought about it. When I first perceived it I prostrated myself before our Lord with tears and asked Him with very earnest feeling to remove me or to give me the patience to bear it. I can assure you that since that moment I have never expressed a desire on the matter, God having done me the mercy to add to the tranquillity I had before calm peace which I cannot even describe

to you. It seems to me that it is an effect of God's love towards me which has caused that already in my heart to grow so vastly that I am filled to the brim with it. The inconceivable part of this disease is that it bears in its train the feeling of a great number of ills that one has not got."

The disease was cancer, and of course in those days utterly hopeless.

"My illness increases day by day, reverend father," she wrote to Rancé in January 1693, only a short while before her death; "there is every appearance that it cannot go on much longer. I beg you very humbly not to let any one know of my disease after my death, as they have not known in my lifetime. God will certainly reward you for all the good you have done me. I pray for this with all my heart. I feel the same repose and tranquillity always, and I await the accomplishment of God's will. I desire nothing else."

The end came on the 6th of the month. She died happy and resigned. Some of her last thoughts were for La Fontaine, whose conversion was also close at hand. He had lain dangerously ill since the preceding December, and knew nothing of her death, which had taken place in a house in the Rue aux Vaches, in the Luxembourg quarter. When he was better this bitter blow fell upon him with a special significance. She had died wishing that he might live a better life and find the peace she had found.

Something of this wish he had known years before, and embodied in his poetic discourse addressed to her :

“ Des solides plaisirs je n’ai suivi que l’ombre :
 J’ai toujours abusé du plus cher de nos biens ;
 Les pensers amusants, les vagues entretiens,
 Vains enfants du loisir, délices chimériques ;
 Les romans, et le jeu, peste des républiques
 Par qui sont dévoyés les esprits les plus droits,
 Ridicule fureur qui se moque des lois ;
 Cent autres passions, des sages condamnées,
 Ont pris comme à l’envi la fleur de mes années.
 L’usage des vrais biens répareroit ces maux,
 Je le sais, et je cours encore à des biens faux.

Que me servent ces vers avec soin composés ?
 N’en attends-je autre fruit que de les voir prisés ?
 C’est peu que leurs conseils, si je ne sais les suivre,
 Et qu’au moins vers ma fin je ne commence à vivre ;
 Car je n’ai pas vécu ; j’ai servi deux tyrans :
 Un vain bruit et l’amour ont partagé mes ans.
 Qu’est-ce que vivre, Iris ? Vous pouvez nous l’apprendre.
 Votre réponse est prête ; il me semble l’entendre :
 ‘ C’est jouir des vrais biens avec tranquillité ;
 Faire usage du temps et de l’oisiveté ;
 S’acquitter des honneurs dus à l’Être suprême ;
 Renoncer aux Philis en faveur de soi-même ;
 Bannir le fol amour et les vœux impuissants,
 Comme hydres dans nos cœurs sans cesse renaissants.’ ”¹

¹ “ Of solid joys I follow but the shadow ;
 I have abused the dearest of our boons—
 Amusing thoughts, gay dreams, and vague discourses,
 Delights chimerical, vain fruits of leisure,
 Novels and cards, the curse of all republics,
 By which e’en upright minds may be misled,

These lines, which are among the most beautiful he ever wrote, were read before the French Academy on the great day of his reception there.

A foolish madness, scoffing at the laws,
With other passions by wise men condemned,
Have plucked, like thieves, the flower of my years.
To seek true good would still repair these ills;
I know it—yet I turn to false gods ever.

What profit in these lines with care composed?
Need I no other fruit than praise for them?
Little their counsels if I heed them not,
And, at the close of life, do not begin to live.—
For lived I have not; I have served two masters,
An empty fame and love have filled my years.
What, then, is living? Iris, you could tell me!
Your answer promptly comes; I seem to hear it:
'Enjoy true good in sweet tranquillity,
Make use of time, and of thy leisure hours;
Pay honour where 'tis due—to God alone;
Renounce thy Phylises in favour of thy self;
Banish those foolish loves, those impotent desires,
Like hydras in our hearts incessantly reborn.'

Translated by KATHERINE P. WORMELEY.

CHAPTER XII

THE ACADEMY

ON May 2nd, 1684, La Fontaine was elected a member of the French Academy. He was not allowed to join the immortal forty without a struggle, and the fact that the honour he coveted became his shows that he was not altogether deficient in perseverance.

In 1635 the nucleus of the Academy, formed originally by Godeau, Gombauld, Chapelain, Conrart, and four others in 1629, was established on a permanent basis by letters patent granted by Louis XIV. Since that date all the literary men vied with one another to obtain the privilege of being included in the academic body. By 1639 the full number of forty had been elected.

The original list of names does not contain many belonging to men of great genius or learning. Besides the eight founder members, there were Boissier, Desmarets, Gomberville, Racan, Boissat, Vaugelas, Voiture, Balzac, and Segulier. Most of the others have remained in the oblivion from which they had emerged for but a brief span of time.

Between 1665 and 1675, when La Fontaine was becoming famous and might well believe he was entitled to join the Academicians, a number of changes had already taken place among them. Benserade had succeeded Chapelain, Corneille had obtained a seat as early as 1647. Racine had been admitted in 1673, Colbert in 1660. Huet, Patru, Furetière, Pellisson, and Gilles Boileau were among La Fontaine's personal friends who had already achieved the distinction of being elected, and it is scarcely surprising that the fabulist should seek a reason why he himself had been passed over. No doubt this subject was frequently discussed in the little coterie that met in the Rue Vieux-Colombier. They all knew there why Molière had never had a chance. He was an actor, and social standing was considered an essential qualification of a man of learning. Actors were outclassed. As for Boileau, he was not as popular as his brother, having made enemies through his Satires. But when he received the appointment of historiographer and became the accredited man of letters to the King, the aspect of matters changed.

As for La Fontaine, his position at Court was not one to be greatly envied. His Fables had brought him fame of one sort, his Tales of another. All his attempts to win favour had in one way or another gone astray. He had not been quite astute enough to realise which way the wind was blowing. The collection of Fables dedicated to Mme de Montespan ought

to have reached her a little earlier. She had been favourite for ten years and was losing her power. His eulogy of Mlle de Fontanges was a little premature. He had reckoned on a grand passion and reckoned wrongly. The "Contes," and possibly his personal behaviour as well, made it impossible for him to win the good graces of Mme de Maintenon, who was beginning to pull the wires at Court. The poet had known her in earlier and less affluent days, when as Scarron's wife she had held a salon of wits and *bons viveurs*, at the time when Fouquet had befriended her husband as well as himself. But that was no recommendation in her eyes. Her circumstances had altered. She desired to forget that none too creditable past. La Fontaine and the gay salons he represented stood for an element in Paris life which she deprecated. She was endeavouring to draw the King away from the levity she deplored, to influence him in the direction of higher and better things.

There was nothing, then, to be hoped for from the lady de Maintenon. Perhaps she would have been pleased if La Fontaine had dedicated to her some verses on pious subjects, and to these lengths he was not then prepared to go for the sake of currying favour. Much later, when he was anxious to write hymns, the time had gone by for material benefits to be of use to him. Nevertheless as the years passed and his name did not come up for discussion in the Academy, or if it did was speedily negatived, the poet

grew impatient ; and when in December 1681 Abbé Cotin died it appears probable, although there is no direct proof of it, that La Fontaine offered himself as a candidate in his place.¹ The Abbé de Dangeau obtained the seat in February 1682, and no further vacancy occurred until the death of Colbert in September 1683.

Then La Fontaine made another attempt to join the forty, but Louis XIV. was anxious that Boileau should obtain a seat. According to Louis Racine's account, the King asked Boileau one evening at supper whether he was an Academician. The historiographer replied modestly that he was not worthy of the honour. "I wish you to be elected," replied the King. Knowing of this, La Fontaine approached his friend to ask whether he intended to become his competitor. Boileau said he did not, and took no steps to canvass his friends. Nevertheless he obtained several votes. The majority, however, went to La Fontaine, and when, as the custom was, the King was asked to ratify the nomination, he replied simply, "I will see," and La Fontaine's election remained in abeyance.

There are many accounts of this preliminary election, and a doubt exists as to the number of the votes obtained respectively by La Fontaine and Boileau. In

¹ Monnoye wrote : "When you inform me that the Abbé Cotin is dead, I say so much the better for the Academy ; but as to what you add concerning the famous M. de la Fontaine standing as a candidate and that he was excluded, I say so much the worse for the Academy."—*Œuvres choisies de la Monnoye*, vol. iii. p. 106 (1769).



LA FONTAINE
From a miniature in the Louvre

a letter which Bourdelin wrote to Condé on November 16th, 1683, he mentions that twenty-three were given to the fabulist and only sixteen to the satirist, thus presuming that all thirty-nine Academicians were present.

The usually accepted version is that at the first ballot La Fontaine obtained sixteen votes, whilst seven were in favour of Boileau. Walckenaer, Mesnard, and Lafenestre have named these figures, which were originally taken from d'Olivet.

In the Registers of the French Academy under date of Monday, November 15th, 1683, the entry occurs as follows :

“This day a meeting was called to discuss the election of an Academician to fill the place left vacant by the death of M. Colbert. The proceedings took the usual course, beginning with drawing lots for certain gentlemen to assist at the scrutiny of the ballot-papers. The lot fell to the Marquis de Dangeau ; and each member present having handed in his paper, the Director, M. Doujat, and the Secretary, the Abbé Régnier, accompanied the Marquis de Dangeau to the room where the ballot-papers were to be examined. They numbered twenty-three.”

During the deliberations preceding the withdrawal, opposition had been raised to La Fontaine's election by Toussaint Rose, secretary to the King. Throwing upon the table a volume of the poet's "Contes," he addressed the assembled Academicians, saying

spitefully, "Je vois bien, messieurs, qu'il vous faut un Marot.¹" Benserade saved the situation with apt repartee. He replied, "Et à vous une marotte" (a fool's bauble), implying that Rose was the King's fool and not his secretary. The laugh was general, and the wave of ill-feeling towards the fabulist dispersed.

At the next meeting of the Academicians, on November 20th, Doujat reported that he had been to Versailles to give the King an account of what had happened on the 15th, and to discover if he were agreeable that they should proceed with the election of M. de la Fontaine. His Majesty, having done him the honour of listening with great courtesy, said he was aware there had been some disturbance and an exhibition of party feeling at the meeting of the Academy, and when Doujat made light of this, he replied that formalities were not satisfactorily concluded and he would presently make his intentions concerning M. de la Fontaine known to the members.

The fact that opposition had come from a quarter so near to the throne looked remarkably as though Rose's attitude at the preliminary election had been sanctioned by or had even originated with his royal master. There was, however, a certain amount of personal feeling against the poet.

"On the one hand," wrote d'Olivet, "most of the

¹ A play on the name of the sixteenth-century poet was intended; *maraud* means a knave or rascal.

Academicians wished for his admission, on account of his rare genius and his great reputation ; but on the other hand, some of them judged that, having composed and published poetry in which he had exceeded the bounds of modesty, he ought not to be admitted to a society which regarded virtue as of more importance than talents, and which counted amongst its members many prelates."

Whilst waiting for the King's decision, La Fontaine, who, added d'Olivet, "took the outcome of the affair much to heart," presented a ballad to his Majesty glorifying all the great actions of his reign, of which the refrain ran :

"The result cannot but be happy."

This poem he begged Mme de Thianges to interpret to Louis XIV. It closed with the lines :

"Prince, en un mot soyez ce que vous êtes :
L'événement ne peut m'être qu'heureux."

When at length a second seat became vacant through the death of de Bezons, and Boileau was elected, Louis remarked that this choice was very agreeable to him and would be generally approved. "Now," added the King, in d'Olivet's version of the affair, "you can receive La Fontaine immediately. He has promised to be good in future."

On April 24th, 1684, the final formalities were completed and the two new Academicians were

assured of their seats. The days on which the public receptions should take place were discussed. La Fontaine's was fixed for the following week. Boileau had followed the King to Flanders, and the day of his admission was postponed until July.

It is interesting to compare the speeches made by the two writers on the day of reception. La Fontaine's is more artificial. It rings with insincerity. He had promised to reform, and he endeavoured to show that he was sincere.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I beg of you to add one more favour to those you have already granted me: that is not to expect from me thanks in proportion to the magnitude of your kindness. It is not that I do not experience extreme gratitude, but there are some things which it is easier to feel than to express; and although emotion should produce eloquence, mine is not unlike those vessels which being too full do not allow their contents to escape. You will see, gentlemen, by my ingenuousness, and by the want of artifice in what I say, that it is my heart which thanks you and not my wit.

"In truth, my joy would not be reasonable were it more moderate. You are receiving me into an Institution where one is not only taught to arrange one's words, but even the words themselves, their true use, all their beauty and power. . . . You have an equally good knowledge, gentlemen, of the language of the gods and that of men. I place

these two talents above all others except for a third which surpasses them, namely, the language of piety, which, excellent as it is, must be familiar to you all. The other two languages can only be the servants of this one. I have had the opportunity of learning it in your compositions, where it shines with both majesty and grace.

“With all these advantages it is not astonishing that you should exercise sovereign authority in the Republic of Letters. Whatever applause the happiest productions of the mind may have won, one is not assured of their worth unless your approbation confirms that of the public. Your judgments do not resemble those of the Senate of ancient Rome. There an appeal was made to the people. In France the people’s judgment comes after yours. It submits to your opinions without a voice of its own. This jurisdiction which is so universally respected has been established by your merits. The works you have given to the public are perfect models for every kind of writing and for every style.”

His long speech was full of humility, contrition, and apparent respect for his future colleagues, but these sentiments did not disarm the criticism of the Abbé de la Chambre, upon whom fell the responsibility of a reply. It was framed much in the tone of a schoolmaster reproving a wilful pupil. “Count as nothing the work you have already done,” he declared. “The Louvre will inspire you to better

things, to nobler and finer ideas than you have entertained in the past. Recollect night and day that in the future you will be working under the eye of a Prince who will be kept informed of the progress you make in the path of virtue and will esteem you only as you are sincere in your aspirations. Reflect that the more careful you have been to choose and to polish the phrases which you have just spoken, and which will be reported in our registers, the more they will condemn you some day should you fail to add purity of manners to doctrine and purity of mind and heart to purity of style and language, for these things mean nothing without the others."

There is no means of judging whether La Fontaine was hurt by these veiled insults. The joys of his new honour were probably mingled with misgivings as to his future relations with his new colleagues. They were so critical and so uncharitable to any one who earned their disapprobation. Even Boileau, whose usual attitude was to defer to nobody, had for once to express a submission he can scarcely have felt. He was, however, more direct and less cringing than La Fontaine in his speech, which only lasted one quarter of an hour.

"But," he remarked, "if you hardly regard me as a man of letters, what can I offer you that may be worthy of the favour with which you have been pleased to honour me? Should it be a mean collection of poetry, successful rather by a happy

temerity, and a dexterous imitation of the ancients than by the beauty of its thoughts, or the richness of its expressions? Should it be a translation that falls so far short of the great masterpieces with which you every day supply us, and in which you so gloriously revive Thucydides, Xenophon, Tacitus, and all the rest of the renowned heroes of the most learned antiquity? No, gentlemen, you are too well acquainted with the just value of things to recompense at a rate so high such humble productions as mine, and offer me voluntarily upon so slight a foundation an honour which the knowledge of my want of merit had discouraged me still from demanding.

“What can be the reason, then, which in my behalf has so happily influenced you upon this occasion? I begin to make some discovery of it, and I dare engage that I shall not make you blush by exposing it. The goodness which the greatest prince in the world has shown in employing me, together with one of your most illustrious writers, to collect and embody the infinite number of his immortal deeds, has outweighed all my defects with you.

“Yes, gentlemen, whatever just reasons ought to have excluded me for ever from your Academy, you believed you could not with justice let a man who is destined to speak of such mighty things be deprived of the benefit of your lessons, or be instructed in any other school than yours.”

La Fontaine and Boileau, having obtained their heart's desire, and becoming members of the Academy, were mixed up before long in a hot dispute which was raging round a mutual friend, the Abbé de Furetière.

Born in 1620, and therefore one year older than La Fontaine, Antoine Furetière had entered the Academy in 1662. He had deeply offended his colleagues by printing his "Dictionnaire Universel," in which it was supposed that much of the work already prepared by the Academicians was embodied. This is not the place to discuss the comparative merits of the dictionaries, nor to discover in how far Furetière had sinned. Having revolted against the established orders of his thirty-nine peers, and being quite unamenable to reason and diplomacy, he was pilloried as a public example and expelled from his seat. His case came up for consideration on January 22nd, 1685, and La Fontaine was present.

In spite of his former friendship for Furetière he appears to have voted with the judges for the exclusion of one who had committed a breach of privilege. The story went round that he had blackballed his friend, and Furetière was furious. He regarded it as base desertion on the part of one on whose support he felt sure he could reckon. He poured forth a number of defamatory libels, and, as was usually the case in France when literary quarrels were in progress, epigrams flowed fast and thick from all sides.

Furetière obtained seconds to help him in this wordy duel, and the Academicians so far forgot their dignity as to utter responses. Feeling ran as high, and expressions were quite as poignant as in the couplet war which raged some years later between Houdart de Lamotte, J. B. Rousseau, and the others, whilst the vituperations much resembled those which made the quarrel between Voltaire and Abbé Desfontaines memorable.

Furetière composed three *factums*, all penned with trenchant wit and bitter satire. The first was published in 1685, the last in 1688. La Fontaine was the only writer of real merit whom he attacked openly. He accused him of being a bad father, a parasite, a false friend, and a dissipated idler. He could not altogether deny his genius, because he knew it too well, but the fact that Boileau and Racine had remained his partisans and the fabulist had failed him was a bitter blow to his pride.

The second *factum* contained the diatribe against his former friend. It was aimed at Desmarets, Charpentier, François and Paul Tallemant, Boyer, and Michel Leclerc. In it he wrote the contemptuous phrase about La Fontaine's plays already quoted, comparing them with the unsuccessful work of Boyer and Leclerc, although at that date *Ragotin* and *Le Florentin* were the only two that had been performed, and they were fairly well received. He also referred to the old quarrel of Lulli with which

Quinault was connected, making a play on the latter's name.

“La Fontaine,” he wrote, “aspired to compose an opera, and he complained in the tale of the ‘Florentin’ that Lulli had made him look a fool [*enquinaudé*], but this effort only served to give M. Quinault the pleasure of seeing that there is an author in France who is inferior in capacity to him. He boasts of an unfortunate talent which makes him esteemed. He pretends that he shows originality in the art of veiling indecencies, and in entrusting innocent souls with a fatal poison. From this he has earned a good right to the title *Arétin mitigé*. It is this which made him a favourite among the coquettes, and this which prevented him from obtaining the seat in the Academy for which he has been suing for seven years. The opposition formed against him there was so strong that when his election was discussed one of his works was thrown upon the table. In it he had offended against both piety and modesty so deeply that the most sensible declared against him, and he was indebted for his admission to the enemies his competitor had at that time. He was reproached with the necessity of having his works printed clandestinely, fearing the censure and punishment of the magistrates of the police. I do not know by what good fortune he escaped it, because in the Tales on which he prides himself the most there are things so scandalous that they absolutely outrage the laws and our religion.”

And then followed an attack on "La Coupe enchantée," and some unjustifiable remarks relating to this "contraband merchandise" having been allowed to "infect" the public through the agency of an actress to whom he had dedicated one of his works. His references to La Champmeslé were in the worst of bad taste. He continued to rail at La Fontaine's knowledge, or rather the want of it, saying that after thirty years of filling the post of *maître particulier des eaux et forêts*, he confessed that he learned from the "Universal Dictionary" what was the difference between *bois en grume* and *bois marmenteau*, and certain other terms of his trade, with which he had never been familiar.

To this reflection on a knowledge of his profession La Fontaine replied in an epigram, printed by Furetière as follows :

"Toi qui de tout as connoissance entière,
Écoute, ami Furetière :
Lorsque certaines gens,
Pour se venger de tes dits outrageants,
Frappoient sur toi comme sur une enclume,
Avec un bois porté sous le manteau
Dis-moi si c'étoit bois en grume,
Ou si c'étoit bois marmenteau." ¹

¹ La Fontaine's own version of his epigram was, however, somewhat different and rather better :

"Toi qui crois tout savoir, merveilleux Furetière,
Qui décides toujours, et sur toute matière,
Quand, de tes chicanes outré,
Guilleragues t'eut rencontré,

This effusion gained its author no honour. It but established the theory that he did not know the difference between the various kinds of timber, since neither *bois en grume* nor *bois marmenteau* were proper materials of which to make offensive weapons. Furetière was ready with a reply which he calculated would pulverise his opponent. In this instance, as in many others, however, it may be taken for granted that La Fontaine tried to appear more stupid than he really was :

“Dangereux inventeur de cent vilaines fables,
Sachez que, pour livrer de médisants assauts,
Si vous ne voulez pas que le coup porte à faux,
Il doit être fondé sur des faits véritables.
Çà, disons-nous tous deux nos vérités :
Il est du bois de plus d’une manière ;
Je n’ai jamais senti celui que vous citez ;
Notre ressemblance est entière,
Car vous ne sentez point celui que vous portez.”¹

The poet received this verse with the retort that

Et, frappant sur ton dos comme sur une enclume,
Eut à coups de bâton secoué ton manteau,
Le bâton, dis-le nous, étoit-ce bois de grume,
Ou bien du bois de marmenteau ?”

“Wonderful Furetière, since you claim to know everything and to decide upon all points, tell us this—when Guilleragues, exasperated by your quibbles, fell upon you, thumped you like an anvil, and gave your jacket a dusting, was his cudgel made from buttes or top-logs ?”

¹ “Pernicious inventor of a hundred villainous fables, know that libellous attacks fall wide of the mark unless they are founded on fact. Let us tell each other home truths—there are more kinds of wood than one—we are as like as peas, for I never felt the kind you mention, and you do not feel the load you carry.”

his adversary was unfeeling, and Furetière had another answer ready immediately :

“ Quelque ladre qu'on fût, il seroit impossible
Qu'un bois en grume ou marmenteau
Ne se rendît pas très sensible,
Si l'on étoit chargé d'un si pesant fardeau.
Mais quand un infâme préfère
A son honneur son intérêt,
Son cocuage volontaire
Le peut charger de toute une forêt
Qu'il doit encor filer doux et se taire.”¹

In several quarters this “war of wits” aroused just indignation. The Comte de Bussy-Rabutin wrote to Furetière on May 4th, 1686 :

“I have read your two *factums*, sir, and I sympathise with the troubles which were the cause of your writing them. I was very sorry to see that your colleagues were so carried away by their anger against you that they forced you into a reprisal as fierce as the attack you made upon them. . . . At the same time it seems to me that you confounded those whom you regarded as your adversaries.

“I found two amongst others who may have done you wrong (I do not know exactly what they did) who do not seem to me to merit your disparagement. They are M. de Benserade and M. de la Fontaine.

¹ “However thick-skinned one may be, the weight of a butte or a top-log could not fail to make itself felt; but when a wretch prefers interest to honour, his voluntary degradation will make him sing small and bear the weight of a whole forest without a murmur.”

The first is a man of birth, whose songs, madrigals, and ballets,—all finely and delicately turned, and only understood by men of taste,—have given pleasure to the most discerning man and the greatest king in the world. With regard to proverbs and double meanings, of which you accuse him, he has never used any but in jest. In short, he is a singular genius, who has employed more wit in his trifles than many of the most finished poems contain.

“With respect to M. de la Fontaine, he is the most pleasing tale-teller France has ever boasted. It is true there are some passages in his stories which, skilfully as he has clothed them, are but too apparent; but if he were to render them less intelligible, his work would be perfect. The greater part of his prologues, which are of his own invention, are master-pieces of the kind; and respecting those, as well as his fables and tales, posterity will consider him as an original, who to the simplicity of Marot has added a thousand times more grace.”

And then the writer assured his correspondent that his remarks were all the more earnest because La Fontaine was not a friend of his, that he had never even set eyes on him, and only knew him by his works.

Eight days later Bussy received a letter from Mme de Sévigné, containing remarks on this subject:

“All your pleasures, your amusements, your tricks,

your letters, and your verses have given me real joy, and particularly what you write in defence of Benserade and La Fontaine, against this vile *factum*. I had before said the same, in a low note, to all who praised this wicked satire. The author seems to me to show clearly that he neither belongs to the world nor to the Court, and that his taste is pedantry, which we cannot even hope to correct. There are certain things which, if we do not understand at first, we never understand. Hard and unsociable minds cannot enter into the charms and easy style of the ballets of Benserade and the fables of La Fontaine. This door is shut against them, and so is mine. They are unworthy ever to understand these sorts of beauties, and are condemned to the misfortune of censuring them, and of being censured themselves by every person of understanding . . . there is nothing to be done but to pray for them; for no human power is capable of enlightening them. These are the sentiments I shall always entertain for a man who condemns the noble fire and verses of Benserade, and who does not feel the charms of La Fontaine's fables."

And with Mme de Sévigné's scornful comments on a man whom she regarded as beyond the hope of redemption, it is possible to dismiss Furetière from the fabulist's affairs.

About this time La Fontaine took a share—perhaps more passive than active—in the war of the Ancients

and Moderns. On January 27th, 1687, Perrault made his manifesto against the Ancients, reading his poem "Le Siècle de Louis le Grand" before the Academy.

The quarrel had begun as far back as 1635, when Boisrobert had the audacity, it was said, "to compare Homer to the singers of the crossways whose poems gave joy to the canaille." Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin took up the cudgels in earnest, and well belaboured the Ancients. The war at this time was a holy rather than a literary one. Desmarets, in trying to decapitate Homer, expected to see the whole of paganism slain.

Santeuil, waving a pen in the cause of the Latins, saw that the battle was going against the weak. "Come," he cried to Perrault, "come and aid us. Do not scorn my appeal. Apollo is falling under the weight of the evils assailing him. Abandoned, plunged into dark night, Latin poetry has lost all credit, all honour. His withered laurels are falling from his brow, his disdained lyre is silenced."

Desmarets took up the refrain on his side: "Come to our defence; Perrault; France calls you. Come and fight this rebel band, this hostile army, with me. Weak and mutinous, they prefer Latin works to our poetry."

Perrault, between two fires, had not declared his opinion. Santeuil saw the importance of his support from the Academy's point of view, but could do



L'ABBÉ DE FURETIÈRE



nothing. Of a sudden the three Perrault brothers—Claude, Nicolas, and Charles—all of them writers, flung themselves violently upon Boileau, who was fighting in the front rank of the supporters of the Ancients. By his side was Racine. La Fontaine, never far away, watched the affray with interested eyes.

Then Perrault spoke in the Academy, not without weight, turning the Ancients to ridicule and exalting the Moderns. It was, they said, as though he thought Chapelain's "Pucelle" a work far above the Iliad in price. Yet in naming the great men of the century he mentioned neither La Fontaine nor Racine.

Boileau was angered beyond words by this seeming insult. Huet attempted to calm the speaker, and explained that his manner was not delicate enough. Racine, more of an adept in the gentle speech that turneth away wrath, thanked Perrault "for his excellent pleasantry," and refused to accept his protestations of earnestness. Boileau, said d'Olivet, in his rage did not only sharpen his arrows, he dipped them in poison. La Fontaine now awakened to the fact that his word would bear weight in the discussion. Ten days after the disorderly meeting he issued a leaflet containing an *épître* in verse to the savant Huet, Bishop of Soissons and of Avranches, to whom he had presented a Quintilian in a translation by Horatius Tuscanella. He boldly took the part of

the Ancients, and at the same time gave an insight into his particular tastes :

“Térence est dans mes mains ; je m'instruis dans Horace ;
Homère et son rival sont mes dieux du Parnasse.
Je le dis aux rochers ; on veut d'autres discours :
Ne pas louer son siècle est parler à des sourds.
Je le loue, et je sais qu'il n'est pas sans mérite ;
Mais près de ces grands noms notre gloire est petite.”

His own affections were undoubtedly in the past :

“Quand notre siècle auroit ses savants et ses sages,
En trouverai-je un seul approchant de Platon ?”

But he confesses to other loves :

“Je chéris l'Arioste et j'estime le Tasse ;
Plein de Machiavel, entêté de Boccace,
J'en parle si souvent qu'on en est étourdi ;
J'en lis qui sont du Nord, et qui sont du Midi.”

Huet was grateful for the present. In his *Memoirs* he speaks of a time that was “fertile to me in friends,” and includes amongst them La Fontaine. “The very pleasing and humorous writer of tales,” he wrote, “somewhat, indeed, too licentious, when he had been informed that I wished to see Tuscanella's Italian version of Quintilian's *Institutes*, not only liberally brought it to me as a present, but adorned his gift with an elegant poem addressed to me, in which he satirised the insanity of those who place

in competition, and even prefer, our own age to antiquity. In this La Fontaine gave a proof of his own candour ; for while he ranked among the most delightful writers of his nation, he chose rather to plead against himself than to defraud the Ancients of their merited honours."

"Près de ces grands noms notre gloire est petite !"

CHAPTER XIII

FRIENDSHIPS OF LATER YEARS

WHEN La Fontaine was admitted to the French Academy he was sixty-three years of age. The retirement of Mme de la Sablière, in 1685, remained a great grief to him ; and although she had thoughtfully provided for his material wants, the charm of her constant sympathy had been removed at a time when he needed it most, for he was growing old. He was also soon to be deprived of the society of Mme de Bouillon, who left Paris for London, whither her sister the Duchesse de Mazarin had preceded her ten years earlier. Hortense had gathered round her a little group of congenial friends, among them Saint-Evremond, Lady Harvey, the Duke of Devonshire, Lord Montagu, and Lord Godolphin.

The fabulist was already acquainted with several of them. Ralph Montagu, Duke of Montagu, had been Ambassador Extraordinary to Louis XIV. in 1669 and again in 1676 and 1677. During his stay there gay doings were the rule at the English Embassy in Paris. When Montagu plotted for Monmouth he

was aided by his sister Anne, wife of Sir Daniel Harvey, to whom La Fontaine dedicated "*Le Renard Anglois.*" "Mrs. Hervey," wrote Barrillon, who was then at the Court of St. James, and still kept up his friendship with La Fontaine, "is as deep as her brother in all the intrigues. She is a woman of bold and enterprising spirit and has interest and connections with a great number of people of the Court and Parliament."

La Fontaine in his dedication to her wrote :

"Le bon cœur chez vous, compagnon de bon sens,
Avec cent qualités trop long à déduire
Une noblesse d'âme, un talent pour conduire
Et les affaires et les gens,
Une humeur franche et libre et le don d'être amie
Malgré Jupiter et les temps orageux."¹

She was very friendly with the Duchesse de Mazarin, and increased the rivalry between that lady and the famous Duchess of Portsmouth.

The members of this little coterie, having been informed that La Fontaine's circumstances were growing precarious, resolved to invite him to England, where he had gained a great personal reputation, and they undertook to provide him with means of an honourable subsistence.

In those days it was no small undertaking to travel

¹ "In you a good heart accompanies good sense and a hundred other qualities too numerous to mention, such as nobility of soul, a gift for managing both men and affairs, a frank and free humour, and the talent for being a good friend in spite of Jupiter and stormy days."

from Paris to London, and La Fontaine hesitated on the brink of the journey, and finally decided that he was too deeply rooted in his native soil to bear transplantation.

He longed for the Duchesse de Bouillon's return, and in November 1687 wrote her a characteristic letter, touching on all sorts of different subjects, but returning ever to the one nearest his heart, her charm and cleverness :

"We begin to murmur against the English for detaining you so long among them. I suggest that they should surrender you to France before the end of the autumn and that we give them by way of exchange two or three islands in the ocean. If nothing were concerned in this matter but my own personal satisfaction, I would not grudge the ocean itself to them. After all perhaps we have more reason to complain of your sister than of England. One does not part from Mme la Duchesse de Mazarin merely because one pleases. You are both of you endowed with everything which makes the rest of the world forgotten. I mean with charms and graces of all kinds.

"Where'er you please your course to bend,
Pleasure, mirth, and love attend

And where your steps the naked surface greet,
Roses spring up to kiss your feet.'

"I am informed that you are admired by all the

English for your wit, your behaviour, and a thousand other qualities that charm them. This is so much the more glorious for you, because the English are not the readiest people in the world to admire foreigners. I have only observed that they know true merit and are pleased with it.

“Your philosopher was exceedingly surprised when he was told that Descartes was not the inventor of the system we call the *machine of animals*, but that a Spaniard had discovered it before him. Though he had not received the least proof of this matter of fact, yet for all that I should easily believe it ; for I know of none but Spaniards who could build such castles in the air as this. I discover every day some opinion of Descartes scattered here and there in the writings of the ancients ; and particularly something like this : that there are no real colours in the universe ; they are only so many different effects of light upon different superficies. Adieu, then, to the lilies and roses of our Amyntas. There is no such thing as a white skin, or black hair ; our passions have nothing for their foundation but a colourless body ; after this how can I make verses on the principal beauty of women ?

“Those gentlemen who do not realise how far your Grace’s knowledge extends, and the desire that you have to be capable of understanding everything with no more trouble than that of hearing it discussed at your table, will perhaps call my judgment in question

for entertaining you thus with matters of philosophy ! but I must inform them that every subject suits your capabilities, as do all books provided they are good ones.

“ ‘No writers are to you unknown,
Nor subjects that they write upon,
You hear each syllable they say,
While with your birds and dogs you play.
Than the famed Roman you do more,
Who dictated at once to four.’

“ This same worthy person, as I take it, was Julius Cæsar, who, as we read, made four dispatches all at once dealing with four different subjects. You are not inferior to him in this respect ; and I remember that as I was reading some verses to you one morning I found you very attentive at the same time to what I read and to three quarrels proceeding among your dogs. It is true, they were ready to strangle one another. Even Jupiter, the Reconciler, could not have brought the affair to so happy a termination. Let people judge by this, madame, what a comprehensive genius you are, and how far your penetration may extend when it is only employed upon one subject. You pass judgment upon a thousand different works, and your judgment is never in the wrong.

“ ‘To you the serious and the gay,
To you the tender and sublime,
Their humble adorations pay,
The sovereign judge of prose and rhyme.

.

Thus may the numerous crowds that sue,
 And press to pay their court to you ;
 Anacreon shall in person come,
 From your fair lips to take his doom.
 Waller, Saint-Evremond, and I
 Will join to keep you company.
 Who would Anacreon turn away,
 Always youthful, always gay ?
 Or who would e'er refuse to see
 Waller, Saint-Evremond, and me ?'

"You and Mme Mazarin shall call us together. We will meet in England, Mr. Waller, M. de Saint-Evremond, the merry old Greek and myself. Do you think, madame, it is possible to find four poets better matched together ? What a merry sight will it be to see us four bards, who would add up to at least three hundred years between us :

" 'Our heads with rosy chaplets crowned,
 Dance and trip it on the ground ;
 In grateful hymns and praises join
 To celebrate the god of wine.' "

And so forth and so forth in merry strain.

He desired that M. de Barrillon and M. de Bonrepaus should honour him with communications. That, he declared, was almost all the business he had in England, except that he wished to convert Mme d'Hervart, Mme de Gouvernet, and my Lady Eland, "because they are persons I exceedingly honour, but I am informed that they are not yet in a disposition

to be wrought upon." Besides he wanted to pay his respects to the King. "It is worth any man's while to cross the sea on purpose to see him," he wrote of James II.

He concluded the long letter with a panegyric on the two sisters.

"Like sisters you love, and the sovereign sway
Between you divide, while your subjects obey:
But I'll no dispute about preference raise,
Since nothing's so nice to be parted as praise.
Were Tully now living, whose eloquent vein
Did the hearts of the people and senators gain,
His rhetoric would fail in such matters as these,
Two heroes, two wits, and two beauties to please."

To this remarkable document Mme de Bouillon begged Saint-Evremond to reply, knowing that he could compose pretty little verses with greater ease than she. And he, nothing loath, obeyed her behest, referring again to the proposed visit of La Fontaine to England:

"If you had been as sensibly touched with the merits of Mme de Bouillon as we are charmed by them, you had certainly accompanied her into England, where you would have found several ladies that know you as well by your works as Mme de la Sablière knows you by your conversation. They have not had the pleasure of seeing you, which they so earnestly desired, but then they have had the satisfaction of reading your letter, that has gallantry and wit enough

to make even Voiture himself jealous, were he now alive. Mme de Bouillon, Mme Mazarin, and the Ambassador were resolved that I should make some sort of an answer to it. The attempt is difficult; however, I will do my best to obey them. . . . Mme de Bouillon may do very well without my prose, after she has read the handsome panegyric which you sent her. However, I cannot forbear to say that there are inimitable graces in everything she does, and in everything she says; that she is no less happy in her acquired than natural endowments; and that her knowledge is equal to her other charms. In her ordinary conversation she always disputes with wit; and often (to my shame I own it) with reason; but a reason so lively that indifferent judges take it for passion, and even the nicest would be hardly able to distinguish it from anger in any person less amiable than herself."

When he wished to speak of Mme Mazarin he found it necessary to pass over her charms in silence, being unable to describe them; but in a poem he bade Helen of Troy not to quit Lethe lest she should see Hortense and die of jealousy, and he ends up with the lines :

"Oh, Fontaine! If Hortensia's praise you'll sing
The boldest fable with you bring:
Low common truths her charms impair;
From vulgar incense she will fly;
For godlike heroes and the godlike fair
Fiction itself can't soar too high."

“Mr. Waller,”¹ wrote Saint-Evremond in the same letter, “whose loss we so much regret, preserved the flame and vigour of his wit to the eighty-second year of his age.

“‘Thus to myself I sighing cried,
With Waller every Muse had died,
Had not Fontaine his room supplied.’”

La Fontaine answered this effusion of Saint-Evremond's on December 18th, and invented still more elaborate phrases. Saint-Evremond desired that the glory of Mme Mazarin should fill the universe, and La Fontaine prayed that the fame of Mme de Bouillon might spread still farther ; so, said the latter, “let neither of us sleep till we have put a fine enterprise into execution. Let us make ourselves knights of the Round Table, for it happens well enough that this sort of chivalry began first in England. We will have two magnificent tents erected at our own expense, and above these two tents we will place the portraits of the two divinities we adore.

“At the foot of some bridge, or the side of a wood, the heralds shall publish this challenge aloud :

‘Great Mariana and Hortensia see,
She without equal, without second she,
Born high above their sex, unrivalled stand,
And all the hearts of all the world demand.’”

La Fontaine suggested that Barrillon should act as umpire and arbitrate in this matter of rivalry. The

¹ Waller died on October 21st, 1687.

fact that he was able to clear up political and personal matters between two kings was proof enough that he was well suited to choose between two such charming women.

With much correspondence of this sort the grand project to entice the poet to England fizzled out. No decisive steps were taken, and La Fontaine remained where he was. Ninon, who in 1687 had written of the Duchesse de Bouillon that "she appears not a day older than eighteen ; such charms are a sign of the Mazarin blood," wrote to Saint-Evremond some time later :

"I understand that you wished La Fontaine in England. We have but little of his company at Paris. His head is very much weakened. This is the fate of poets ; Tasso and Lucretius felt it. I doubt no love-powder has been laid for La Fontaine ; for he did not much court women who could be at the expense of it."

Ninon exaggerated. La Fontaine had not lost any of his faculties. Balked of the voyage to England, he looked about him with a view to establishing his comfort in Paris. He was still in the Rue Saint-Honoré, but saw little of Mme de la Sablière ; and in a letter written on August 31st, 1687, to M. de Bonrepaus he confesses to occasional loneliness, and also refers to a new friendship which before long was to have a great significance in his life. "I wish," he wrote, "that you could see Mme d'Hervart. No

one speaks of vapours or of coughs at her house now, just as though these enemies of the human race had departed to another world. All the same they still reign in this one ; it is only that Mme d'Hervart has bade them begone for ever. In the place of such unpleasant guests, she retains gaiety and the graces and a thousand other charming things which you can easily imagine. I am satisfied when I see these ladies. They soften the absence of those of the Rue Saint-Honoré, who certainly neglect us a little. I dare not say they neglect us too much. M. de Barrillon will remember that they are the kind of enchantresses who make ordinary wine and an omelette taste like nectar and ambrosia."

The ladies to whom he attributed neglect were Mmes Misson and de la Mésangère, Mme de la Sablière's daughters. In the absence of their mother they were not so attentive to her old friend as he could have wished.

In the same letter La Fontaine describes his room in the Rue Saint-Honoré which he calls the chamber of the philosophers. There he sat surrounded by great men, who could never disturb his thoughts because they were statues of baked clay, probably representing Socrates, Plato, and Epicurus. Among his living friends were d'Hervart, Vergier, d'Hervart's secretary, and Saint-Dié, son of President Perrot de Saint-Dié, who loved pleasure and entertainment, hunting, dancing, and gambling. Music was wanting in this

philosophic chamber, and the owner bethought him of buying a harpsichord; but no sooner was that supplied than, lo and behold, a charming little musician was required to play upon it. One was soon found in the person of Mlle Certin, a well-known player to whom Chaulieu wrote a madrigal :

“Je dois ce soir voir une belle,
Dont le sçavoir et la beauté.
Font douter s'il faut qu'on l'appelle
Muse, grace, ou divinité.”¹

La Fontaine called her Chloris, and described how young and pretty she was. He said that in having her to play to him he risked bringing love into touch with philosophy. He explained that he had already banished love, and that if she reintroduced it he would give her song for song :

“Je l'en avois banni ; si Chloris le ramène,
Elle aura chansons pour chansons.”

His friend, M. Anne d'Hervart, was the son of Bartholomew Hervart or Herwarth, and *maître des requêtes*. In 1686 he married a very charming and beautiful woman, Françoise le Ragois de Breton-Villiers. This lady felt a real affection for La Fontaine. She used to invite him to Bois-le-Vicomte, her country house. Once when he was about to pay her a long visit Vergier wrote to Mme d'Hervart that he would

¹ “This evening I shall set eyes on a fair maid, whose intellect and beauty raise a doubt as to whether she should be named Muse, Grace, or Divinity.”—“Œuvres de Chaulieu.”

love to see the Bonhomme enjoying the charming glades of her park and grounds, speaking of peace or war, of poetry, wine, or love, suggesting a number of improvements in the universe, and, without showing his own doubt, raising a thousand doubts in the minds of others. Then all suddenly, continued Vergier, he would become silent—not to dream of those who dreamt so much of him, nor of any ordinary matters, but just to prevent himself from becoming bored. “Because, you know, madame,” he concluded, “he is bored everywhere. Do not be displeased with this characteristic when he is with you, especially if you are trying to get him to regulate his habits or his expenses.”

At that time evidently Mme d’Hervart did not know La Fontaine thoroughly. She was soon to gain experience and to discover that she could not shut her eyes to the fact that the poet was a mere infant, whose amiable faults might lead him into difficulties. Vergier was not likely to condemn these faults, because many of them were his own. He had thrown up the priesthood and taken an administrative post in the navy. He wrote tales which were quite as free as those by La Fontaine, and his madrigals were something like those by La Fare and Chaulieu. No doubt he was a congenial spirit, and his presence added gaiety to the merry sojourns at Bois-le-Vicomte, near Mitry. There La Fontaine met Mlle de Gouvernet, sister of the Marquis de Gouvernet, and Mlle de Beaulieu, a charming young lady of fifteen summers. La Fon-



LOUIS JOSEPH, DUC DE VENDÔME

taine wrote to Vergier that he was quite incapable of resisting the latter's charms, her fine eyes, delicate skin, fair complexion, particularly agreeable expression, sweet mouth, and fascinating glances. He blamed M. d'Hervart for not having warned him that he was about to meet such beauty and such irresistible attractions. Old as he was, he still thought himself in love with every pretty woman, and was so much engrossed in thoughts of this one that he did not notice the road he was travelling on the return journey from Mme d'Hervart's house.

"I should have left before dinner," he wrote, "and then I should not have gone three leagues out of my way as I did, and I should not have stayed at Louvres, like the idiot I was, a village which is only a quarter of a league further from Paris than from Boisle-Vicomte. Rain kept me for two hours at Auney. I was still on horseback when it was close upon ten o'clock. A lackey, the only man I met, told me how far I had missed the right road, and put me straight again, in spite of Mlle de Beaulieu, who kept my mind so busy that I remembered neither time nor way. But it served me nothing. I had to put up for the night . . . and Mlle de Beaulieu was thus the cause of my sleeping in a miserable hamlet !"

When he reached Paris he was still so dreamy and preoccupied that every one spoke about the sentimental air he wore and invented fresh stories as to its cause.

He followed up this account of his belated passion

with some charming and graceful verses, in which he compared the young enchantress to the spring, and deplored his own age. Vergier would laugh at his folly, but even so he could not conceal it, and his only difficulty was to find words adequate to express her charms :

“Comment pourrois-je décrire
Des regards si gracieux?
Il semble, à voir son sourire,
Que l'Aurore ouvre son cieux.”¹

Mlle Beaulieu was not the only one who received his compliments : “If Mlle de Gouvernet,” he added, “is still at Bois-le-Vicomte, I beg you will tell her from me that her presence adorned a spot which I thought nothing could improve.”

Vergier and the others were amused by this glimpse into the poet's inflammable heart, full of tender affections and youthful yearnings. Vergier replied to this letter, chaffing the writer about losing his way, and describing him as the sort of person who slept as long as he could, arose in the morning without any plans, went a walk without having an aim or a reason, and tumbled into bed at night without even knowing how he had spent the intervening hours. It surprised him to hear that La Fontaine had only gone three leagues out of his way. Having started on the wrong track, and being governed by the laws of

¹ “How could I describe her gracious looks? To see her smile is to believe that Aurora is throwing wide the gates of heaven.”

motion, Vergier thought that impetus and the horse he rode might easily have carried the poet on and on in the same direction till he reached the ends of the earth.

In 1691 Mme d'Hervart was staying at Bois-le-Vicomte in company with Mlle de Gouvernet, who was now Mme de Viriville, and Mme de Gouvernet, who was sister to M. d'Hervart. This lady had married Charles de la Tour, Marquis de Gouvernet, and their daughter Esther became the wife of the son of the Marquis of Halifax in 1684. La Fontaine called her Mme d'Helang, which was his version of Lady Eland.

After the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes the de Gouvernets went to England, abandoning their property. It is possible they too urged La Fontaine to visit them there. As he did not do so, Mme d'Hervart begged him to join them all at her country house on their return. Probably he would have done so had it not been that his opera, *Astrée*, was being rehearsed in the capital, and he felt it impossible to leave. He penned the ladies the joint letter already referred to, which was full of compliments and regrets. He declared that it would be utterly unsafe for him to risk visiting a château where there were such charming sirens, because he believed they would cast a spell over him and make it impossible for him to leave. He described their court as composed of three lovely goddesses, "intendantes du Parnasse."

Mme d'Hervart was quite accustomed to his poetic effusions. She troubled not at all because he wrote verses to her under the name of Sylvie, the name which he had used long before for Mme de Fouquet. Naïvely he had written to Bonrepaus in 1687: "As I am godfather to several beauties, I wish that Mme d'Hervart should be called Sylvie in all the dominions I possess on the Mount of Parnassus." He made an effective use of the name in his poem, beginning :

"On languit, on meurt près de Sylvie,
C'est un sort dont les rois sont jaloux,"¹

written in the same year.

He was, however, to remain by her side for a long time without any tragic results of the kind. After he recovered from an illness in 1693, and found that his protectress had died, he wandered out of the hôtel in the Rue Saint-Honoré with the intention of seeking a new home. The story runs that at the corner of the street he met M. d'Hervart, who asked him to come to the Hôtel d'Hervart in the Rue de la Platrière. "I am going there," responded the imperturbable poet. And there he remained under the wing of Mme d'Hervart almost to the end of his days. He loved to sit in the garden, and it was supposed that Mignard painted his portrait² in this favourite spot.

¹ "One languishes and expires beside Sylvia,
A fate of which kings are envious."

² When Mme de Gouvernet brought over to England a number of paintings and treasures, there was amongst them a small painting

Mme d'Hervart, who would have liked to look after her protégé's morals, had to be content with looking after his clothes, of which he was very neglectful. One morning when he went out he was surprised because his friends congratulated him on his spruce appearance. As he was not in the least aware of a change in his attire, he looked at his coat and discovered to his surprise that it was a new one. Mme d'Hervart had stolen a march on him, made an exchange without his knowledge, and destroyed the cast-off garment so that he might not again appear in her presence wearing it.

This kindly woman found it much easier to get her poet to discard unsuitable clothes than it was to get him to give up his many unsuitable friends. The older he grew, the more he loved gaiety. Everybody was urging him to penance and religion, and the more they urged, the more he wanted to join in brilliant orgies with the Vendômes, the Contis, the Comte de Fiesque, Chaulieu, and the libertines of the Temple. One of his friends, a certain Mme Ulrich, had a very questionable reputation. She was the daughter of one of the King's twenty-four violin players. Forced by the death of her father to earn her living, she became the servant of a barber at the age of fourteen; but being pretty and understanding very well on which which was described in English as representing "the fountain in the little garden of the Hôtel d'Hervart." It was thought that this painting, which cannot be traced, represented the poet La Fontaine, and not merely a still-life scene.

side her bread was buttered, she found that her wit, her grace, and her knowledge of dancing were marketable commodities for which a certain M. Ulrich¹ seemed quite willing to pay. At his expense she went into a convent and received there a good education, but so little esteem did she feel towards her benefactor that she had no scruples in carrying on an intrigue with Dancourt the author-actor. Ulrich, hearing that his trust had been betrayed, imprudently married his protégée, thinking that he would be able to reform her inherent frailty when she was under his own eye. His mistake very soon became evident. Dissatisfied with the extent of her husband's income, she found it easy to obtain means to expend on luxuries from other and less creditable sources.

Among her numerous lovers were a certain Boulanger, whom she ruined ; the Marquis de Sablé, to whom she wrote an epistle printed in her edition of La Fontaine's posthumous works ; and the Duc de Ventadour. Her charms and laxity won for her the friendship of an equally bold lady, Mme de Choiseul-Praslin, a niece of Mlle de la Vallière, who invited her to her hôtel in the Rue de l'Université, where she allowed her guest to hold a sort of court of her own, to which were attracted all the rich idlers and *bons viveurs* of the town. Games were played there day and night, and among the visitors were musketeers

¹ The *maitre d'hôtel* to one of the Duchesse de Bouillon's brothers-in-law, the Comte d'Auvergne.

and a number of *petits maîtres*, who never scrupled, when the fancy took them, to go to the house and grow very rowdy, breaking china and window-panes, and generally behaving in an easy-going fashion.

La Fontaine had probably made Mme Ulrich's acquaintance soon after her marriage, when she was a member of the household of the Comte d'Auvergne.

In her Preface to the "Posthumous Works" she mentioned the close friendship with which the poet honoured her during the latter years of his life, and all the marks of distinction which she received at his hands. She spoke of his rare and original character, and was perhaps partly responsible for the well-known personal portrait by M***, which is attributed to the Marquis de Sablé, and which she probably urged him to contribute :

"He was like a plain vase without external adornment, which contains infinite treasures within. He neglected his personal appearance, always dressed very simply, his features and expression seemed slightly coarse ; but when one looked at him attentively one read humour in his eye and a certain vivacity which even age could not extinguish, and this made it evident that he had more in him than appeared on the surface.

"It was true also that with people he did not know, or who did not please him, he was grave and dreamy, and even in beginning a conversation with people he liked he was sometimes cold ; but directly the conversa-

tion began to interest him, and he took part in the argument, he was no longer a dreamer, but a man who spoke much and well, who quoted the ancients and gave fresh charms to them. He was a philosopher, but a gay philosopher—in a word, he was La Fontaine, and La Fontaine as he is in his works.

“He made, moreover, a charming addition to the pleasures of the table. He increased them by his jokes and appreciation, and he has always been thought, and rightly so, a very charming guest. . . .

“All those who loved his works (and who does not love them?) loved his person as well. He was admitted to the best houses in all France. The whole world desired to invite him ; and if I named all the illustrious persons who took an enormous pleasure in his conversation, I should have to make a list of the whole Court.”

This spirited reply was made to a very different portrait drawn by La Bruyère, who described the poet as :

“A man appearing heavy, dull, and stupid ; who does not know how to talk or to narrate what he has recently seen. But let him begin to write, and we have a model of good story-telling. He can make animals speak and trees, as well as stones and all things that have no voice. There is in his writings nothing but ease and elegance, and the most natural grace and delicacy.”

When this was written La Fontaine had been friendly with Mme Ulrich for some time.

She had one daughter, who was as virtuous as her mother was the reverse. Thérèse Ulrich had been placed at the Convent d'Evreux and there La Fontaine was asked to visit her. He called her a "proud little *peste*." In her anxiety to induce her mother to abandon her evil ways, Thérèse obtained by influence a *lettre de cachet* authorising her to shut her mother up in her own convent, a plan which was brought to naught by the mother-superior, who, perhaps wisely, did not wish to encourage the presence of so irredeemable a character. After La Fontaine's death this lady continued her wicked ways, and she became notorious through figuring in more than one police report.

It is obvious from La Fontaine's letters that he was intimately associated with her and her friends, especially with the Marquis de Sablé and the Abbé Servien. Mme Ulrich was helped by the Marquis to edit the "Posthumous Works." She dedicated them to Sablé "because they belonged to him by the regard the author had always had for him, by the friendship the Marquis had felt for the poet during his life and the esteem he continued to feel after his death."

The letters to Mme Ulrich were dated respectively October and November 1688, and are both much in the same strain.

"Free me as soon as you can from the anxiety which I feel with regard to the return of your

husband, for it prevents my sleeping," he wrote during M. Ulrich's absence. "That and the cold I have contracted have thrown me into a state of insomnia which will last as long as I remain in Paris. Add to all these enemies of sleep (to speak poetically) the violent friendship I feel for you, and you will see that there are many nights in which I find time to keep myself occupied with thinking of your beauty and in building castles in the air. I accept, madame, the partridges, the champagne, and the chickens, also a room at the Marquis de Sablé's house, provided this room will be in Paris. I also accept the kindness, the conversation, and the politeness of the Abbé de Servien and of your friend. In one word I accept all things that give much pleasure,—and you are quite made up of it.

"But I keep returning in thought to the demon of a husband who is nevertheless a very good fellow. Don't let him take you by surprise. I am overcome with fear lest we should see him without expecting to, like the robber in the Gospels. Let us avoid that, I pray you, if it is possible, for I am not too certain of my standing, not any more than is madame, so that I am cautious towards a husband who is sometimes a little rebellious. You will pay with charming caresses, but what could I pay with? Adieu, madame, continue to love me, and keep me in the good graces of both the brothers.

"I have seen Mlle Thérèse, who seems to me of a

beauty and complexion surpassing everything. Only her pride shocks me. Have you never noticed that your daughter is a proud little plague? . . ." Once again he added, "Please do not let us be taken by surprise."

"I have received, madame," he wrote a month later, "one of your letters which is not dated. It is so full of tenderness for me and of all things which cannot fail to be intensely agreeable to me, that I wish I had kept back one which I wrote you ten days ago, and which was only sent to you last Saturday. I have seen Mlle Thérèse since then, not only to obey your orders, but for my own pleasure, and very great pleasure as well. She has the best complexion of any girl I have ever seen. Do not imagine that we shall let her die of grief during your absence." After referring to the preparation of William of Orange to depart for England, he concluded with, "I shall often see your daughter, and shall think of you still oftener, feeling assured that you on your side will take care not to forget me."

These letters were included in the volume edited by Mme Ulrich. "*Les Quiproquo*," his last Conte, probably composed for her, was also in it, as well as many dedications, letters, and poems to the Prince de Conti, the Duc de Vendôme, and those who were his friends at this period of his life.

The leading lights of the fastest set in Paris were the Duc de Vendôme, his brother the Grand Prieur, La Fare, Chaulieu, and others who belonged to the

Temple. For gambling, debauchery, trickery, fast living of every kind, the reputations of these four men were equally bad. It was notorious that the Grand Prieur never once went to bed sober, that Ninon refused to have anything to do with him and was not well-disposed to La Fontaine simply because he was his friend. Liar, thief, swindler, and cheat were some of the harsh epithets hurled at his head by Saint-Simon: "a dishonest man to the marrow of his bones," he wrote, "he had all the vices of his brother." As for Chaulieu, he was quite as self-seeking, and even robbed his benefactor the Duc de Vendôme, who sent him away from Anet when he discovered this ingratitude.

In this company, sometimes reinforced by the Vendômes' aunt, Mme de Bouillon, and her brother the Duc de Nevers, La Fontaine made himself quite at home. He begged money from the Duc de Vendôme through the sycophant Chaulieu.

"D'un soin obligeant
L'Abbé m'a promis quelque argent,
Amen, et le ciel le conserve!"

He gambled with La Fare, he connived at intrigues with the Grand Prieur, he made little poems with Chaulieu, La Fare, and the Duc de Nevers, and he drank wine with them all.

"Pour nouvelles de par-deçà,
Nous faisons au Temple merveilles.

L'autre jour on but vingt bouteilles ;
 Renier¹ en fut l'architriclin.
 La nuit étant sur son déclin,
 Lorsque j'eus vidé mainte coupe,
 Lanjamet, aussi de la troupe,
 Me ramena dans mon manoir.
 Je lui donnai, non le bonsoir,
 Mais le bonjour : la blonde Aurore,
 En quittant le rivage maure,
 Nous avoit à table trouvés,
 Nos verres nets et bien lavés,
 Mais nos yeux étant un peu troubles,
 Sans pourtant voir les objets doubles.
 Jusqu'au point du jour on chanta,
 On but, on rit, on disputa."

During the lifetime of Philippe de Vendôme the Temple was often the scene of this sort of feasting. Twenty wine bottles were emptied in a trice and no one went home till morning. This gay company foreshadowed the days of the Regency, being out of keeping with the growing puritanism of the close of Louis XIV.'s reign.

La Fontaine was perhaps one of the least wicked of them all, but his increasing years do not appear to have brought with them increasing wisdom.

About 1689, when his friendship with the Vendômes was at its height, he was writing letters to François-Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Conti. For nearly

¹ Renier, who had organised this particular orgy of the poem, was a pupil of Lulli's, who rivalled Ninon in his mastery of the lute. At this time he was a pensioner of the Grand Prieur's. Lanjamet had been a lieutenant in the Guards.

twenty years he had been friendly with the family. Condé was always regarded as one of his protectors, and when his brother, Louis-Armand, Prince de Conti, was ten years old La Fontaine dedicated the "Recueil de Poésies Chrétiennes" to him. Thirteen years later he wrote for him a "declamation," "le Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince." On January 16th, 1680, Louis-Armand married Mlle de Blois, and into his *épître* to Mlle de Fontanges the poet worked two epithalamiums, one about this wedding and the other for the Dauphin, who was united to Marie-Anne-Christine de Bavière on March 7th following.

In 1689, when he was sixty-eight years of age, he wrote "Le Songe" for the Princesse de Conti, which has a sound of spring in its lines :

"Conti me parut lors mille fois plus légère
Que ne dansent aux bois la Nymphé et la Bergère,
L'herbe l'auroit portée, une fleur n'auroit pas
Reçu l'empreinte de ses pas."¹

This Prince de Conti died November 9th, 1685, after nursing his wife through the small-pox ; and his brother, the Prince de la Roche-sur-Yon, took the title of Conti. Both brothers had been out of favour with the King for some time, having used insulting expressions concerning Louis XIV. in letters which had

¹ "Conti appears to me a thousand times more airy than the Nymph and the Shepherdess who dance in the woods. The blades of grass could have borne her easily and not a flower could have felt the pressure of her footsteps."

been officially intercepted. La Fontaine was unfortunate in this. He was rarely on the side of the favourites, and very often well-disposed to those who had lost caste in the royal master's eyes. But to the good-natured poet such accidents meant nothing ; he was not likely to desert his friends for the sake of favours to be gained at Court.

When he succeeded to the title, Roche-sur-Yon was languishing in exile at Isle-Adam. La Fontaine sent him verses deploring Conti's death. Saint-Simon described the Prince as "un très bel esprit, juste, exact, vaste, étendu, d'une lecture infinie." La Fontaine's letters to him were half in prose, half in verse, and were probably rewarded with gifts of money. He dedicated the fable of "Le Milan, le Roi, et le Chasseur" to him, and also wrote a poem on his marriage to Mlle de Bourbon, the granddaughter of the great Condé. Other verses in honour of the Princess were composed by the poet in August 1689.

"Bourbon sait sur nous exercer
Une aimable et douce puissance ;
Elle ravit sans y penser :
Que fait-elle lorsqu'elle y pense ?"

Was it more wearisome for the composer to compose, for the recipient to receive, or for the patron to pay for these stereotyped eulogies ? Perhaps the individual who put his hand into his pocket and brought out a substantial sum could give the most effective answer to the question.

CHAPTER XIV

CONVERSION

LA FONTAINE lived a life of pleasure and little suppers with intervals for composition from 1688 to 1692, in the December of which year he fell seriously ill. He was over seventy years of age and his life's work was nearly done. Mme de la Sablière's house in the Rue Saint-Honoré was close by the Church of Saint-Roch, and the vicar, learning that the poet lay sick unto death, sent a priest of the name of Pouget to minister to his soul. Pouget's earnestness was so intense that the nurse who was by the invalid's bedside thought it necessary to interfere. "Don't worry him like that," she cried to the man of God, who was drawing a terrible picture of hell-fires. "The poor man is more stupid than wicked. God would not have the courage to damn him."

There is something pathetic about the story of La Fontaine's conversion. It would have seemed much more like him if he had gone to his grave the old reprobate he really was. The playful, pleasure-loving fable-writer had nothing in common with hair-shirts, sackcloth and ashes and penances, yet he turned to

these things at the last in the hope of winning heaven. Conversions were fashionable, and Mme de la Sablière had pointed out the way. No discussion of the reasons for the step he took would be profitable or even possible. It is a fact which must be accepted, and which is most satisfactorily told in the words of the priest who was instrumental in bringing it about.

“Six weeks before,” wrote Pouget, referring to the poet’s illness, “I had been appointed curate of the parish of Saint-Roch, being only twenty-six years old, and six months previously I was made a doctor of the Sorbonne. Until then I had neither assisted at nor heard the confession of any invalid. The vicar of Saint-Roch, knowing of this illness, begged me to go and see M. de la Fontaine, in order to give him the benefit of my ministrations. I did what I could to be excused, pleading that I was too young a man for one of his age, and that since he had lived a life which conformed but little to the rules of Christianity, and was well known for his scandalous works, which were exceedingly pernicious to youth, he required a more enlightened guide than myself.

“The vicar of Saint-Roch absolutely desired me to go, and I obeyed him. I took with me a mutual friend, a man of much wit, who was intimate with M. de la Fontaine. He did not wish to present me at first in my quality of pastor, but as a friend who had come to inquire after the state of his health on behalf of my father, who was then alive and to whom

M. de la Fontaine paid occasional visits. I charged the friend who accompanied me to say that I was curate of the parish, in order to bring me imperceptibly to the point at which I could speak of God and His salvation.

“This first visit lasted two hours. After the ordinary greetings I naturally and imperceptibly turned the conversation upon matters of religion and piety. M. de la Fontaine raised several objections. I had said that a man of good sense, who wished to examine into matters with a clear brain, could not help agreeing after this examination that the Christian religion was true, and that, once granting its truth, it was foolish to live as most people did, in a manner entirely opposed to the beliefs they professed. I supported this with all the reasons which presented themselves to my mind.

“M. de la Fontaine, who was a very ingenuous and simple being, possessed of plenty of intelligence, said to me with pleasant artlessness: ‘Some time ago I set myself to read the New Testament. I assure you,’ he added, ‘that it is a very good book; but there is one thing in it to which I cannot agree, it is that of eternal punishment. I do not see,’ he said, ‘how that eternity can be in accordance with God’s goodness.’

“I replied that it was not necessary that he should understand; that there were things still more incomprehensible that he was obliged to believe;

that in general all mysteries are incomprehensible ; that it was enough to examine the truth of revelation, and when one was certain that God had spoken and that He had clearly explained His purpose, it was necessary for human reason to be silent and submit to a God who spoke and explained ; and that after that it was easy to make him see that eternal punishment was only just and was founded in reason ; and I explained to him on this point with vivacity and at length the principles of Saint-Augustin and of other fathers and theologians. I had these questions at my fingers' ends because I came from the benches of the Sorbonne where they were much discussed.

“ After several responses on the part of M. de la Fontaine, he had at last nothing more to reply, and yielded to me. I closed the conversation. We parted well pleased with one another. He begged me to come again. I promised to see him every day as long as his illness lasted. I had arranged that the friend I had brought should remain behind me, and when I had left he said to him that he was very pleased with our conversation, that he had other difficulties about which he wished to consult me, and that if he should ever decide to confess he did not wish for any other confessor but myself. I returned to his room the same afternoon. We had a long chat together, and the conversation turned upon the proofs of the Christian religion.

“ M. de la Fontaine had never been an infidel,

but at the same time he was the kind of man who, as all the world knows, never makes capital of his religion. He was somewhat abstracted, hardly ever thought coherently, had at times very pleasant flashes of wit, but at others seemed almost dull ; he never put himself about, and took nothing much to heart. His malady caused him to reflect seriously. During all this time I recognised in him a fund of good sense. He seized upon the truth and gave himself up to it. He did not try to cavil at it. He appeared to me to be acting uprightly and in good faith, and he told me that if he decided to confess I should see that he would do it with his whole heart, and that he would not be shamming. I exhorted him always, after having discussed speculative matters of religion, to look into his own soul, to implore the help of God, to trust in His mercy, and to recollect that at his age and with his disease, which might be protracted, he could not hope for a long lease of life. . . . He listened to me. His conversion was serious."

Then the question was raised as to how La Fontaine should act in order to show his sincerity. Pouget told him there were two things he must do before the Church would admit him to the Sacraments. The first was that he must make a solemn and honourable promise before receiving the Sacraments, if he were obliged to receive them during his illness, or, if he were restored to health, before the assembly of the

French Academy the first time he went there, as a proof of the contrition he felt on account of having written a book like the "Contes." He was to ask forgiveness of God and the Church. The second was that he should promise publicly never to aid in the printing nor to receive any profit from the said book ; and that if he should be restored to health to turn his talent for writing poetry to the production of pious works and no others. In all seriousness La Fontaine offered to give the money he had received from an edition of the "Contes" to the Church.

Pouget had heard also that the poet had recently composed a play which was applauded by all who had read it, and which he had already placed in the hands of the actors. "I told him," said the priest, "that the profession of actors was an infamous profession, that they were not admitted to the Sacraments of the Church unless they renounced this profession, that he would not be admitted either if he helped to keep them in their profession by writing plays for them to perform, and, in a word, that I could not hear him in confession and give him absolution if he did not promise me never to place the comedy in the hands of the actors."

La Fontaine thought this judgment harsh. When he appealed to the professors at the Sorbonne they all agreed in their verdict. Thereupon he threw the play into the fire without keeping a copy, and the actors never set eyes upon it.

On February 12th, 1693, the holy viaticum was given in the presence of a deputation of Academicians, and La Fontaine proclaimed aloud his retraction :

"It is only too publicly notorious," he said, "that I have had the misfortune to compose a book of infamous Tales. In writing them I did not believe the work was as pernicious as it really is. My eyes have been opened on this point, and I confess that the book is an abominable one. I am deeply contrite for having written and published it. I pray for pardon to God, to the Church, and to you, sir, who are his minister, to you gentlemen of the Academy, and to all who are present. I wish that the work had never been written by my pen, and that it were in my power to suppress it entirely."

He then promised solemnly in the presence of his God to do nothing to further its sale or reissue.

The tragedy of this self-condemnation lay in the fact that it was uttered by the lips of a man who had wished no harm to any one, and who at the last seemed to have lost the strength of his own convictions.

Many years later Pouget testified to the proceedings on that day of humiliation :

"I subscribe with all my heart to the above account," he wrote in 1709, "and it is in consequence of the principles there set forth, that, being curate of the parish of Saint-Roch, I obliged M. de la Fontaine

to make public reparation to the Church, which he had scandalised by his infamous book of *Tales*; and this he did with edification in the presence of a large number of members of the French Academy and of other distinguished persons, when I offered him the holy viaticum on March 1st, 1693, which I should not have done except under these conditions.

“I also induced him to burn a play which had not yet seen the light of day, and which he had been about to hand to the actors for representation had we not been opposed to this plan. He was docile, and has every reason to hope that God has pardoned him.

“Monsieur the Duc de Bourgogne, who whilst still very young had pious sentiments which the whole world recognised in him, was so overjoyed with this action of the late M. de la Fontaine, that, on the same day as the public reparation, which made a great stir in the Court and in the town, he sent one of his gentlemen to congratulate him, with orders to hand him on his behalf a purse full of louis d’or in order to recompense him for his pecuniary loss.”¹

The Duc de Bourgogne, then aged ten years, sent fifty gold pieces out of his slender store of money, probably being encouraged to this generous act by Fénelon. The twelfth and last book of fables dedicated to the little prince was issued in the same year.

¹ Matter, “*Lettres et Pièces rares ou inédites*, 1846,”

The date of the pious ceremony in which the poet condemned his own work was given by Pouget variously as February 12th and March 1st. The later date is more probably the correct one. The retraction was not entered in the official reports of the Academy. It had not a public character, but was done in this way presumably by La Fontaine's personal desire.

For two years after he had laid aside his worldly tenets La Fontaine struggled to maintain the sanctity for which he had prepared the way by his conversion. His later compositions were religious in tendency. On October 26th, 1694, he wrote to Maucroix: "I hope that we shall both reach the age of eighty years, and that I shall have time to finish my hymns. I should die of *ennui* if I could not continue to compose. Give me your opinion of 'Dies irae, dies illa. . . .'"

In his last letter, dated February 10th, 1695, he viewed death with calmness: "I assure you that your best friend can only reckon on being alive another fortnight. For two months I have not been out at all, except to go to the Academy,¹ because that amuses me. . . ."

The poet's strength was nearly gone. "Yesterday

¹ It had always been one of his great pleasures. Once at a dinner party where he had been the biggest "lion" he suddenly rose to go, saying that he had to attend a meeting at the Academy. Some one told him he was starting too early. "Not at all," he replied quickly, "I shall go the longest way round."

when I was coming away from *thère*," he went on, "I was overcome by such weakness in the middle of the Rue du Chantre, that I surely thought I was on the point of death. . . . Before you receive this note, the gates of eternity may perhaps have opened for me to enter."

Four days after receiving his letter Maucroix sent the poet an affectionate reply :

"The grief occasioned me by your last letter is as great as you can imagine it would be. At the same time I must tell you that I find much consolation in the Christian disposition I see in you. My very dear friend, even the most just among us have need of God's mercy. Therefore take heart and remember that He is called the Father of mercy and God of all consolation. Invoke His pardon with all your heart. What is there that true repentance cannot obtain from this infinite Goodness. If God in His mercy sees well to restore your health, I hope you will come and spend the remainder of your days with me, so that we may often speak together of God's forgiveness. However, if you have not strength to write to me, beg M. Racine¹ to do me this charitable service, the greatest he could ever do for me. Farewell, my good, my old, and my true friend. May God in His great goodness watch over the health of your body and that of your soul."

¹ If Racine wrote in compliance with the request made by Maucroix, the letter has been lost.

On April 11th La Fontaine's condition became rapidly worse, and two days later he died.¹

"Alas ! La Fontaine is no more," wrote Fénelon in his famous eulogy ; "he is gone ; and with him have vanished the saucy jests, hearty laughs, artless charm, and the learning that accompanied them. Weep, all ye who received from the gods a heart and mind capable of appreciating all the delights of elegant poetry, which was both natural and unstudied. Only to him was given the power to render carelessness in art preferable to the most brilliant polish. Weep, then, ye votaries of the Muses ; or better still, console yourselves, La Fontaine lives and will live eternally in his immortal writings. According to dates as we measure time, he belongs to modern centuries ; but by his genius he may be ranked among the great writers of antiquity, whom he recalls in every way in which they excelled. Open his works ! What do you think of them ? It is Anacreon who jokes. It is Horace, free from care, with a flaming heart, who plucks at the lyre. It is Térence, depicting, as he did in his comedies, the living image of manners and human character. The gentleness and elegance of Virgil emanate from his work.

¹ In the burial registers of the parish of Saint-Eustache occurs the following entry :

"On Thursday, April 14th, the late Jean de la Fontaine, one of the forty of the French Academy, aged seventy-six years, living in the Rue Platrière at the Hôtel Derval [d'Hervart], deceased the 13th of this month, was buried in the cemetery of the Saints-Innocents."

Ah! When will the favoured of the gods emulate the fine speeches which he places in the mouths of quadrupeds!"

These words from the pen of a great man wipe out the remembrance of the poet's faults.

"The French Academy," declared the *Mercur* *Galant* for April 1695, "has just had a considerable loss in the person of M. de la Fontaine." In his particular style he was unique, and his "Fables" and "Contes" are finished pieces. He wrote a book in prose entitled "La Psyché," and nothing was achieved by him that had not a distinctive character which singled it out from amongst other works of a similar class. He was called Jean, and it is interesting to see his epitaph by himself, written some months before he died :

"Jean s'en alla comme il étoit venu,
Mangea le fonds avec le revenu,
Tint les trésors chose peu nécessaire,
Quant à son temps, bien le scût dispenser.
Deux parts en fit, dont il souloit passer
L'une à dormir, et l'autre à ne rien faire."¹

La Fontaine's body remained lying where it had first been buried until 1786, when the cemetery of the

¹ "Poor Jean is gone ; as he came, so he went ;
He consumed his lands as well as the rent ;
For gold or silver his love was small,
For his time a very good use he found ;
He spent one half in sleeping sound
And the other half he did nothing at all."

Saints-Innocents was closed in order to make room for the construction of the Halles. According to the account in "Jal's Dictionnaire critique de biographie et d'histoire," his tomb was never again discovered. On November 21st, 1792, a body was found in the cemetery, at the foot of the Crucifix, which appeared to be that of La Fontaine. It was not until 1817, however, that the remains were exhumed and buried in the tomb in the Père-Lachaise, where they are now, next to those of Molière.¹

For fourteen years after the poet's death his widow lived on, presumably at Château-Thierry, where she was buried in 1709. Their son married and, dying in 1723, left in his turn a son and three daughters, born after their grandfather was no more. As far as can be ascertained, his descendants inherited none of the rich treasures of the poet's mind. La Fontaine had no rival in his own particular style; and when the childlike being who had faced with equanimity the world's shine and the world's rain disappeared from mortal eyes, his spirit lived on, as it will always

¹ La Fontaine had written Molière's epitaph twenty years earlier :

"Sous ce tombeau gisent Plaute et Tércence,
Et cependant le seul Molière y git,
Il les faisoit revivre en son esprit
Par leur bel art réjouissant la France.
Ils sont partis! et j'ai peu d'espérance
De les revoir malgré tous nos efforts,
Pour un long temps, selon toute apparence,
Tércence et Plaute, et Molière, sont morts."

live, in the poems he wrote from the heart. Perhaps the secret of his eternal youth is to be found in this : whilst he lived and laboured he never wilfully deceived either God or his brother man ; nor does he ever disappoint the gratified reader who dwells with delight upon his fables.



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